Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen
9
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE

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THE POWER OF MOE
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All bouncy, and jouncy, and jiggly,
and two very soft-looking, well, um…
(Technical difficulties… Please stand by…)

Former Eroge Designer — Shinichi's Mom
Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire
Petralka an Eldant III
Bodyguard #2 from the Eldant Empire
Elvia Harneiman
Shinichi's Bodyguard from the JSDF
Koganuma Minori
Bodyguard #1 from the Eldant Empire
Myusel Fourant
Shinichi's Little Sister -High School Student — Shizuki
LN Author "Kanno Shougo" — Shinichi's Dad
General Manager of Amutech — Kanou Shinichi

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Chapter One: A Novel, but... Light

The air in the classroom was so tense with expectation, it was almost painful.

Stare met stare. The hostility was unmistakable.

Of course, it was only a handful of the students who were glaring at each other—about ten of them, not quite half the class. But those ten were so intense, the other students were swallowed up, overpowered by the situation.

Eyes narrowed. Stances were assumed with total determination.

They were squaring off smack in the middle of the classroom. The tension between them was so high that even I, supposedly the teacher, was hesitant to try to break it up.

As for the other students, they just tried to keep their distance as they looked on. Maybe they saw that if they weren't careful, they could easily get burned by what was going on. But in the tight confines of the classroom, the charged atmosphere let no one escape, allowed no observer to pretend they were indifferent to what was happening.

And then...

"Just you say that again," a diminutive girl growled.

Obviously, the person she was talking to had to have heard her. Had to have heard what amounted to: *Let me hear you make that nasty jibe again, if you dare*.

But usually, confrontations didn't get to this point if one party could be scared off by an implied threat like that. People always say "just talk it out," but sometimes words aren't enough to cool the situation down. Sometimes, in fact, they can add fuel to the fire.

With appropriately withering contempt, the other person replied, "Hah! I'll say it as many times as you want." The young man—tall and slim—representing this second side of the argument looked down, literally and figuratively, on the girl who had spoken first. "I'm getting awfully tired of shallow people who only see the most superficial meaning in things."

"Who's superficial? What's superficial?"

“Oh, you don’t know? No, I suppose you wouldn’t.” The boy smirked. “It means to see only the surface of something. It means when you just stare stupidly at something you’ve been given, like a cow!”

“Who’s a cow?! You’re even worse, with your sick fantasies!”

“What fantasies?! Imagination gives you wings, I say—wings! Argh, one word is hardly enough to express the shallowness of you people!”

“Wings, my foot! You just want the fantasies that suit you! You just have air for brains, so you can’t follow the video!”

“Who’s got air for brains?! You rock-head!”

I watched in bemusement. Yes, you can try to “talk it out,” but sometimes you have to resort to another proverbial expression: “Talk is useless.” Actually, wasn’t that what they said in the May 15 Incident?

Well, it was certainly true here. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not siding with the militarists—that attempted coup d’état was terrorism, plain and simple—but there are times when talk isn’t just useless, it’s downright inappropriate. Sometimes talk just leads to... well, moments like this.

“Arrrgh...” I, Kanou Shinichi, could only put my head in my hands.

Two large LCD monitors stood beside my lectern, one to either side. The ending card of the animated work I’d been showing until just a moment earlier—in other words, the screen with a little illustration and a caption like “That’s all for now” or “See you next week!”—was still on the screens.

The show was *Cast-off Princess*, an anime based on a light novel. It was also the reason for what was happening just then.

“Aw, man, why is it the prickliest parts of otakuism that have to spread...”

Around the world, people who obsess over anime and manga and games are called otaku. This springs from the fact that members of this subculture used to refer to each other not with the casual second-person pronoun *kimi*, or even the formal *anata*, but with the slangy, irreverent term *otaku*.

But forget about the linguistics lesson for a moment. For such a short word, *otaku* can cover a wide range of people. There’s an old saying that holds that where three people are gathered, two of them will join forces against the other one, and otaku are no different. Each has their own opinions and perspectives on things. That’s only natural when you’re dealing with artistic works; they aren’t math problems with a single, absolutely right answer. Even among people who are all fans of a particular

work, you might have someone who views it from the perspective of the hero, another who sees it from the heroine's point of view, and a third person who looks at it from the bad guy's perspective—so you wind up with three wildly different impressions.

To put it in extreme terms, stories are often crafted so that things ultimately break in the hero's favor. And if you sympathize with the main character while you're watching or reading them, that doesn't bother you. You can even enjoy those events. But if you're sympathizing with the villain, then it can all start to look pretty convenient for the hero, and even be downright unpleasant.

These disputes can get even uglier with a media mix like this, where you have, say, an anime based on an original light novel. The most basic division is between fans of the original work, the anime, and the manga versions, each of whom think "their" version is the best and that all the others are dumb versions for stupid people. Sometimes you even get divisions between fans who only like the first season of an anime and those who prefer the second.

I'm not saying any of this is surprising, mind you. Heck, sometimes people can't even agree on what they think about a single character. So when you have a complex story in which a whole cast of characters appear, each with their own complex of relationships and personal concerns, is it any wonder no one can agree on what's good or bad about them? That sometimes people even feel exactly opposite ways about something?

Me personally, I tend to figure you should just like what you like, how you like it, but the more someone gets into a work, the more likely they seem to be to think that they're the only ones who truly love it and to have a negative opinion of people with other points of view.

And that brings us back to...

"I'm telling you, the *Cast-off Princess* anime is a masterpiece!" the girl exclaimed, clenching her fist to emphasize her point.

Well, that in itself wasn't so surprising. Otaku love superlatives: *masterpiece*. *Staggering work of incredible genius*. If anything, I thought it was just a sign of how involved a person was in a work.

What *was* strange was this particular otaku herself. Earlier, I called her diminutive, but that's a bit of an understatement. This girl—Romilda Guld—couldn't have been 130 centimeters tall. She wouldn't have looked out of place at an elementary school, or even a kindergarten.

Admittedly, that wasn't so odd. There are otaku elementary-schoolers, for sure. But considering that her ears were pointy and her hair was so crimson that "redhead" didn't do it justice, it was a different story. Her hair especially—it was so red you might have thought it was made from ruby or something. Rich and lustrous. Anyway, not your everyday hair. And we weren't talking about spray-on color, either.

You're getting the picture: Romilda was not *homo sapiens*. And she wasn't the only one. The boys lined up on either side of her in support all had pointed ears, too. And on top of that...

"She's right!"

"We love Alty-tan!"

"The main heroine is just there for show! *True* fans know that already."

The boys offering this backup were just as short as Romilda, but they each had a scraggly beard. They looked from every angle like the most ancient of old men. They were actually in their teens—most of them were even younger than me—but it was easy to forget that and start speaking to them in deferential language. I wouldn't have been surprised, on talking to one of them, to have him shoot back, "What is it, whippersnapper?"

Dwarves.

That's what they were. Half-sprite demi-humans, a staple of Western fantasy works. They looked like humans, but shorter and with tremendous physical strength. They were deeply knowledgeable about earth and mining, and the magic that went with it. And they had personalities to match.

That's right: one of the groups of students squaring off in my classroom were dwarves.

"Huh! So you're all excited about an anime that takes over only the most superficial elements of the story. How characteristic of a bunch of filthy casuals!" the boy standing across from Romilda sneered.

His name was Loek Slayson. He was tall and slim, with blonde hair and blue eyes, and the boys and girls flanking him all looked like models, too. The guys in particular, with their stately features and flawless skin, looked like the polar opposite of the rugged dwarves.

But they weren't technically human, either. For proof, look no further than Loek's ears, and those of all his friends. They were all pointy. The exact length and pointiness varied from one to the next, but they were clearly not typical human ears.

Elves.

In Western fantasy works, a race just as famous as dwarves. They always live in the woods, are close to nature, and usually have an affinity for wind magic. They aren't as strong as dwarves, but they're usually better at casting spells, and they're always fantastic archers.

"Casual? Who's a casual?"

"You are, that's why I called you that!"

"Well, you guys were all like, 'Raru's so mooooeeee!'"

"Moe is culture! And sweet, oblivious older-sister-type characters are __"

Anyway, you get the idea. These elves and dwarves, the sort of people you might only expect to see in novels or movies or manga or anime—they were right here, arguing about the merits of an anime right in my classroom.

Believe me, it was every bit as surreal as it sounds. Although I was pretty much used to it by now.

Anyway...

Like I said, *Cast-off Princess* had originally been a light novel. After that, it had gotten two different manga versions before being turned into an anime—and of course, because it's impossible to bring every detail of the novel to the screen, they had to shuffle some things around for the anime. What else would you expect from two completely different media?

As obvious as that might seem, though...

"What I'm saying is, the original light novels are so much deeper!"

"They cut out at least three or four major parts of the original, so Winea's change of heart makes no sense! Listen, the main character of this story—"

The elves listed off the virtues of the light novel. Obviously, they preferred it over the anime.

The dwarves, it seemed, favored the animated version.

"Shut your mouths, you original work-ists!"

"Reading is such a pain."

"The anime's easier to follow."

No, nooo, you can't be that direct...!

Still, they weren't exactly wrong, and I wasn't about to go after them about it. I all but had my head in my hands when—

"So even a light novel is too hard for you to read, huh, gravel-brain?"

"Like reading makes you such a big shot!"

“You know what I think? I think the anime gets rid of the pointless filler from the books and makes it easier to tell what the themes are.”

“Wouldn’t the manga be even better, then?”

“The manga doesn’t have Fafare-tan in it! It’s trash!”

.....And so on and so forth.

I had deliberately introduced them to the novel, manga, and anime versions of *Cast-off Princess* all at once. My thinking had been that since they were used to otaku culture, it was time to show them the joys of a media mix, which is like a festival for the senses in which a single work is revised and adapted to the strengths of each medium.

But why did they have to get so obsessed with ranking every last piece of that franchise?

“...Who even cares?” I sighed to myself. “Can’t they all be good?”

To be fair, the elves and the dwarves had a long history of animosity, and this would hardly be the first time they’d fought over something trivial. It seems they used to argue over the differences between their peoples, but they had increasingly set that aside in favor of disputes about preferred characters or works. I wasn’t sure whether to consider that progress.

I did figure that if they were fighting a little less about interracial differences—even if it was just my students—then that was probably a good thing. I guess it’s good to get your kicks from shouting about whether the anime or the light novel was better instead of from racial discrimination. Probably. It was still kind of murky.

“Say, Sensei...”

One student approached me as if ducking under the proverbial bullets flying between the elves and the dwarves. He was a short-ish boy in his teens, with golden hair and a diligent look about him. He came across as really sweet, actually. But his ears, just like mine, weren’t pointed.

His name was Eduardo Teodoro Pertini, and he was human.

Nearly half my class was human, but they mostly stayed out of the arguments between the elves and the dwarves. Humans occupied the highest rung of the social ladder in this world, and they probably saw the demi-humans’ disputes as the bickering of the low-born. At the same time, because an elf/dwarf argument could break out into a magic-slinging battle at any time, everyone was also keeping one ear on the fight, quietly poised to run.

Anyway...

“Eduardo? What is it?” I answered, deliberately averting my eyes from the reality before me.

Eduardo, incidentally, was one of the more distinguished students among the humans. He had a real gift for language, and had learned to read and write Japanese pretty well, even texts that used both kanji and kana. I think he understood the most Japanese of any of my students. He had already translated more than ten light novels into the Eldant language. I had my eye on him—I wouldn’t have been surprised to see him start writing a novel of his own pretty soon.

“About this back page here...”

He showed me a novel he was holding. It was the original version of the very series that had inspired the argument I’d been watching—*Cast-off Princess*.

“Hm? Oh yeah, it’s an advertisement,” I said, nodding.

Light novels usually contain the actual story, an afterword, and then a handful of advertisements to fill out the page count. What happens—and this isn’t specific to light novels—is that a book isn’t printed one page at a time. Instead, several pages are printed on a single large sheet that’s then cut into pieces. Apparently, that’s the most efficient way to do it.

So for example, A6, the standard paper size for novels in Japan, is about half as long and wide as a sheet of A4 paper; in other words, it has about one-quarter the surface area. That makes it one-thirty-second the size of the paper known as A1. Factor in both sides of the paper and you get double that number—in other words, one sheet of A1 can contain sixty-four A6-size pages. The full sheet is cut down to size and turned into a book.

That means that if you had a book that was 256 pages long, you could simply print it on the front and back of four large sheets, and then cut each into thirty-two pieces. That’s why A6-size books often have 256 pages, or 320, or other numbers like that. Of course, with light novels, the illustrations or color pages are sometimes printed separately, so the page number can vary a little bit.

But the content of a novel doesn’t always cooperate with a nice, neat page count. Sometimes you’ll have a book with 257 pages (including the title page and table of contents), so that you have a huge A1 sheet with just one printed page on it, and sixty-three “extra” pages.

It would be a real waste just to leave all those pages sitting there blank, so often editors will do things like use those pages for advertisements for

other series from the same publisher.

All right, there's your lesson on the publishing world. The page Eduardo was showing me was an advertisement for a different series from the novel-turned-anime that was currently at issue.

Angelica—The Burdened Princess, said the ad. *Written By: Kanno Shougo; Illustrated By: Yakiniku BUL*.

I didn't say anything at first.

"I'd like to read this book," Eduardo said. "You haven't imported it yet, have you? Is there any chance you could add it to the manifest for the next shipment?"

"Oh, uh, you're interested in that? Ahh." I couldn't help it if my answer was ambiguous; I sort of half-nodded.

Eduardo, though, was too sharp; he noticed something was off about my answer. "What's wrong, Sensei? Don't you like this series?"

"Oh, uh, I don't have anything against it," I said, shaking my head and smiling weakly. "You really want to read it?"

"Yes, sir!" Eduardo said, his face shining.

Hmmm...

I definitely, unquestionably felt a little funny about this. But I didn't bear Eduardo any ill will, and I had no real reason to turn him down. Apparently the series had sold enough to get an anime adaptation; it would make sense to import it to Eldant as a part of otaku culture. And yet...

"I'll think about it," I answered after a moment, forcing myself to smile. Then I turned back to the classroom.

"That's ridiculous! In the original, Pacifié is all lovey-dovey for the brother she doesn't share a blood connection with."

"You guys just want to turn *everything* into a harem, don't you!"

The impressively passionate argument between the elves and the dwarves was still going full force.

Nobody knew when it had first come into existence.

What was "it"? A hyperspace wormhole somewhere in the "Sea of Trees" near Mount Fuji—the so-called "hole."

The hole connected twenty-first-century Japan to another world. That other world was more on the technological level of Middle Ages Europe,

but it was also a place where humans and demi-humans lived side by side, and where magic was the technology underpinning all of society. It was like something out of a storybook.

The specific place the hole connected Japan to was called the Holy Eldant Empire. The bureaucrats in Japan got it into their heads to open international relations with this country, in hopes that despite the constrained tunnel linking our two lands, the possibilities in this new world —where the laws, economy, and even sometimes physics were all different from Japan—could give Japan an economic boost, maybe even make the country really powerful again.

But again, we were dealing with a completely different world here. A place with a history, culture, and values unlike our own. So although communication was quickly established via telepathic magic, Japan ended up floundering as it tried to find some way to become "friends" with the Eldant Empire.

The one thing that showed any promise was a very specific subculture: the stuff sometimes known as "Cool Japan." Manga, anime, games. In short, otaku culture.

Japan had been exporting its popular culture overseas for quite some time, and it turned out the same stuff was relatively widely accepted in the Eldant Empire as well. A few otaku works were imported on a trial basis, and met a warm reception in a country where, because they were perpetually in a state of quasi-war, no real entertainment industry had developed.

So Japan decided to make popular culture the primary pillar of its diplomatic relations with the Eldant Empire. As part of that policy, they joined forces with the government in Eldant to open the first interdimensional general entertainment company, Amutech—and they brought over a Japanese otaku to be its general manager.

That otaku was Kanou Shinichi. Me.

I ran my finger along the LCD display of my smartphone.

"Hmmm..."

In response to my touch, the screen showed one new photo after another. It was too hard to make out the important details on such a small

screen, though. I would have to transfer the data to my computer later so I could have a closer look.

"That reminds me... I haven't done a single backup since I got here," I said to myself, leaning back in my comfy chair.

I may not need to point out that in this world, there were no wireless-phone base stations. We most often used our smartphones almost like portable battery packs or digital cameras.

"It's such a big deal, whether or not you have internet." I pressed the power button on my laptop computer and took another glance at my phone's pictures while I waited for it to boot up. Most of the photos were ones I'd taken after I arrived here in the Eldant Empire. So in addition to other humans, they showed elves and dwarves, werewolves and lizardmen, even dragons... To a Japanese person who didn't know any better, it might just look like I had been to the world's biggest cosplay convention.

"And it's so easy to Photoshop digital images these days," I muttered. "No one in Japan would ever believe me about all this, even if I showed them these pictures."

So the photos were really just for me, so I could remember.

There was an incident once when some video taken here in Eldant had leaked in Japan—but for better and for worse, these days image technology has gotten so advanced it's almost impossible to tell the real from the fake. You could put a UFO into a photo, for example, and laypeople would have no way of knowing whether the picture was doctored or not. You might see some testimony from experts or scholars on the web stating that the picture is real—but you never know if even those quotes are invented. So sometimes you're left with no choice but to believe only what you want to, or what's easiest...

"Master."

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice like a tinkling bell from the other side of the door. I'd heard that voice more times now than I could count—but just that one word was enough to get me moe. I'm not very knowledgeable about voice actors or anything, but I'm sure this is what they mean when they talk about "getting moe for someone's voice."

"I've brought tea."

"Oh, sure, come in," I said, setting my phone on the desk.

"Thank you."

The door opened, and in walked my maid.

She had long, flaxen hair tied in braids on either side of her head, a headpiece, and a frilly hair band. All of it screamed *maid*, as did the rest of her clothing: an equally frilly apron and a short-ish dress. Honestly, that alone was as nourishing to me as three square meals, but this girl looked sweet and adorable to boot. Her eyes sat wide and round in her face, their purple color making me think of some sort of gemstone.

Myusel Fourant.

As Amutech's maid, she took care of this house I lived in. Me being general manager, she was practically my personal assistant. Hence why she called me "Master." In fact, sometimes when it was just the two of us, she even called me "Shinichi-sama," and it was really... I mean, when she looked at me with those puppy-dog eyes and said my name that way, it was enough to make me squirm with the cuteness. But, er, anyway...

"Hm? Slightly different tea leaves today?" I could tell the aroma from the cart Myusel was pushing wasn't quite the usual.

"I thought I would try the leaves that Brooke-san and Cerise-san brought us."

"Ahh, okay."

Brooke, he was our gardener—and a lizardman. Cerise was his wife, also a lizardman and our other maid. The two of them had recently gone home on account of a meeting of the lizardman Tribal Council or something, and when they came back, they had brought us some local tea leaves. Brooke had warned us about it—*"We don't know much about tea ourselves, so you'll have to forgive us if the taste is unpleasant"*—but from what I was smelling at that moment, I didn't think it was going to be bad.

"Here you go... Shinichi-sama."

"Thank you." I took the cup Myusel had given me.

“Oh...” Myusel made a sound, as if she had suddenly noticed something.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s... me,” she said, pointing with one pale finger to the smartphone on the desk. Specifically, to its LCD screen. Even more specifically, to the photo displayed there.

It showed Myusel herself. It was from back when I had first come here. I’d been so overwhelmed with emotion at the sight of her that I’d taken several photos.

Myusel, I should mention, is a half-elf. So her ears, like those of Loek and Romilda, are kind of pointed, although she often hides them. She looks like she came straight out of a manga or an anime.

To be fair, though, Myusel is awfully beautiful, ears or no ears.

As I mentioned, the Holy Eldant Empire functioned on the social system with humans on top, and elves and dwarves below them. Half-elves—people like Myusel, whom society viewed as “mixed-bloods”—and lizardmen, who were simply too different from humans, ranked even below them. So at first, Myusel had tried to hide her ears from me.

She had been in the military once; it hadn’t matched her personality very well, but it had given her a way to gain citizenship. Then she had worked hard to earn her job at this mansion, but she was justifiably afraid that I would fire her just for being a half-elf—just for something she couldn’t control.

In fact, though, it was the exact opposite. When I discovered her pointy ears, it actually made me feel even closer to her. As someone who had become a home security guard after being shot down by my oldest female friend, the manga/anime-esque (you might even say unreal) nature of Myusel as an elf *and* a maid actually made it easier for me to talk to her. It was sort of like, those “fictional” elements helped to distance me from the cold reality that had hurt me before.

Anyway...

“I’ve shown you photos before, haven’t I?” I said, looking at the phone. “This thing can take hundreds of them.”

“It’s amazing,” Myusel said, her already round eyes getting even bigger.

Fired up by her interest, I started running my finger all over the phone’s screen, showing her one photograph after another. “I have pictures of

Brooke and Elvia in here, too."

"To think, this magic can capture such a detailed image in an instant..."

"Well, it's not magic," I said with a wry grin.

Myusel understood that things like my cell phone's camera existed; she had known about them for a long time now. But she wasn't very clear on the science—how it did what it did—and for her, everything mysterious in the world tended to fall under the category of magic. There's a famous rule in SF that holds that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," and plenty of twenty-first-century Japanese technology was "sufficiently advanced" to look like magic by the Middle Ages European technological standard of the Eldant Empire.

"What's that?" Myusel asked, looking at the screen of my phone again.

Whoops. I'd just kept swiping, lost in thought, and I'd ended up showing Myusel some old photos I'd never really meant to. Now the display was showing pictures from quite a while ago, back when I'd first bought the phone. I guess I'd forgotten to take them off the phone after I'd backed them up to my computer.

These pictures featured all humans. All in Japan, obviously. These photos were from back before my friend had shot me down. Back before I'd shut myself away.

"Oh, those are my parents, and that's my little sister."

It wasn't some neat, posed group photo, just a picture I'd snapped one day when we were all at breakfast, all of us in the same room, eating together. Since I had been taking the picture, of course, I wasn't in it.

There was my dad, the light-novel author. My mom, the former-game-designer turned housewife. And my little sister, two years younger than me —Shizuki.

"So these people are your family, Shinichi-sama..." Myusel somehow sounded deeply moved as she looked at the picture. "Your honored mother and father. And this girl... she's your honored little sister?"

"That's right. Not that we got along all that well..."

Shizuki found my otakuism repugnant, and we had hardly spoken in years. She looked surprised in this photo because I'd just snapped it out of the blue, but then she had immediately gone after me about likeness usage rights or whatever. After I stopped leaving my room, we hardly even saw each other anymore, let alone talked.

"So these are the people who raised you."

“Sure. Or *made* me, you might say.”

My mom and dad both had basically otaku jobs, and I’d come into the fold myself because of the piles of manga and anime and games all over the house. The reason I was familiar with so many old tropes compared to most modern otaku was because of all the time I’d spent poring over my family’s collection. As long as I wasn’t too picky, there were enough manga and anime and games in the house to last me pretty much my entire life without me ever having to actually buy anything new.

Then there was Shizuki. While my mom and dad and I went deep into otakuism, she, almost as a reaction, went the other way. She hated otaku and otaku stuff.

“Honestly, I’d completely forgotten this was even here...” Oddly embarrassed, I moved my finger across the screen, sweeping the family photo away. The next picture came up instead—one I’d taken even before the family shot.

“Yikes,” I gulped. So I hadn’t erased this one, either.

“Who’s this...?” Myusel asked, cocking her head.

What on earth was I supposed to say? I sat and fretted for a few seconds—but then I decided to just answer honestly.

“Uhh,” I said, scratching my cheek in embarrassment at how long it was taking me to come out with it. “That’s... I guess you’d call her... the first girl I was ever in love with.”

The childhood friend I mentioned.

She’d lived near us, so we’d grown up together. We went to the same kindergarten, primary school, *and* middle school. Because our houses were so close, we walked to school together a lot, and because of all the manga and stuff at my house, she came over to visit pretty regularly. We had at least been friends. Of that much, I was sure.

She had never made fun of me for being an otaku. But that was when we were just friends—and apparently, the standard for would-be boyfriends was different.

That was the part I hadn’t understood. After class one day, in that most classic of locations, a twilit schoolyard, I confessed my feelings for her, only to be given the coldest of shoulders. “You’re an otaku, right?” she said. I don’t think she really meant it to be mean... but it was the reason I stopped coming to school.

Ugh... Just remembering that mistake was enough to make my chest hurt. Enough to make me wish there was a hole I could just fling myself into.

I didn't resent that girl anymore. I still object to the idea that there's something inherently wrong with being an otaku, but I guess it's a matter of taste. They say all's well that ends well, and in a convoluted way, her shooting me down ultimately led me here to the Holy Eldant Empire.

And, if I may say so, to this adorable maid of mine.

Speaking of whom...

"Shinichi-sama, your...!" Myusel looked downright shocked, her lavender eyes fixed on the phone's screen.

Just for a second, I didn't really comprehend her reaction. She seemed anxious, or sad, or—anyway, definitely disturbed as she turned to me and asked, "S-So you left this person behind to come here...?"

"Huh? No, I—"

Ahh.

That's when I put the pieces together.

Usually when we talk about "first love," we understand it implies that nothing ultimately came of it. After all, having a "first" love suggests there was a second, or a third, or however many others. But the rings we were wearing, although they enabled telepathic communication, sometimes failed to bring across subtle nuances of meaning. Differences in our knowledge or experience could cause these little misunderstandings. In this case, the only thing that had come across was that this girl was the first person I had ever come to feel love for, and Myusel simply assumed that this girl and I had been dating, and I'd left her in Japan to come to the Holy Eldant Empire.

"It must have been... so hard for you..." Myusel said, looking at me with compassion in her eyes.

There was no cause to panic, but I sort of did. I had the vague sense that I was experiencing something like what a husband would feel when his wife discovers he's been unfaithful to her. (Not that I had any idea what that would be like.) I didn't even really understand why I felt that way, but I rushed to clarify.

"No! No no no! You've got the wrong idea!"

"What...?"

"That love—it didn't last, and she didn't return it anyway, and in the end she shot me down. Because I'm an otaku."

“Because you’re... an otaku?” Now Myusel looked truly confused.

This, too, was a reaction I could only have gotten in the Eldant Empire. Here, the word *otaku* didn’t have the pejorative meaning it often carried in my world. If anything, I was regarded as something of an expert, an authority on the entertainment products arriving from Japan. Myusel couldn’t quite figure out why being an otaku would lead to me being rejected by a girl.

“Do you mean... she didn’t want to become an obstacle as you continued to become a better and better otaku, Shinichi-sama?”

Why did she sound so nervous?

“No, no. Definitely not.” That would be an awfully flattering explanation for me, I’ll admit. It was just like Myusel to come up with something like that. “It’s, well... in my country, there are people who don’t like otaku. People who look down on them. Remember how I said to Petralka once that I knew what it was like to be teased because I was different?”

“Yes, I do...”

“Some people say otaku make them sick, or that otaku are worthless, that sort of thing. Back in my world.”

“Do... Do they really?” Myusel was shocked.

Well, I went and said it.

The people of this world, including Myusel, had a very high opinion of otaku culture—and part of me had always worried what would happen if they found out how that culture was viewed in the very country that produced it. I worried they might think of otaku differently. Might think of me differently.

But instead...

“Even though... How do I say it? Even being so wonderful...” Myusel said in amazement.

Wonderful? Oh... She meant otaku culture.

In any event, learning that some people in Japan made fun of otaku and the things they liked didn’t seem to upset Myusel. That just went to show that she had internalized her own understanding of otaku culture, which she respected. *“Everyone loves so-and-so or such-and-such, so I should too”*: Japanese people, including me, sometimes had a way of ignoring how we really felt about something and just going along with whatever the people around us thought. But that was no good, I was convinced. If you’re just

going along with the trends, it's really hard to enjoy the stories and the works.

And that, I thought, was fertile ground for cultural invasion.

Whatever the case, I was glad. Obviously, there were no guarantees that other people would react as favorably as Myusel—but as the first person I met in this world, whatever she thought about things sort of set a bar for me.

"But Shinichi-sama," Myusel said, looking at my phone's screen again. "The fact that you still have her photo with you means..."

She looked up at me, almost like she was afraid. Why the timidity? (Although I admit it was cute!)

Did she practice this? Did she do it on purpose? Look down, then bring your eyes up by so many degrees... The fire of moe it lit within me was fearsome! *Myusel, you terror...!*

"Could it be, Shinichi-sama, that you still...?"

"No!" I exclaimed, shaking my head vigorously. "Absolutely not!"

Why did she have to think that?! The photos on my phone—most of them were pictures I'd taken since coming here, and most of *those* were of her. I had so many photos of her, in fact, that they threatened to bury all the others, and I was planning to make a "Myusel" folder on my computer.

"She shot me down about as unequivocally as she possibly could. I only have that photo because I've been forgetting to clean up my pictures for so long. I swear that's the only reason! I'd forgotten all about her until just now!"

"I... I see." Myusel put her hand to the chest of her maid uniform and smiled, looking somehow relieved.

Seeing her feel better made me feel better, too.

Japan and the Eldant Empire are connected by a hyperspace wormhole. It makes my country contiguous with a place that shouldn't exist in 3D space. There's obviously some kind of extraordinary power at work. I'm told Japan has been investigating just what power that might be and the principle on which the wormhole operates, but the entire thing is conducted with the utmost secrecy, so it's impossible to commit too many resources or personnel to the project. That means slow progress.

One issue we faced with the wormhole was “noise.” Something about the portal—be it electromagnetic interference or whatever—prevented radio waves from reaching the other side. So the JSDF tried running a conventional telecommunications cable through the hole, but noise was still too much of an issue. The interference with digital signals was especially severe.

They finally tried using an undersea internet cable, the kind with several intertwined layers of shielding, and managed to get an analog signal across. I’d lost track at that point of whether this was the most cutting-edge technology or the oldest. In any event, at last we could communicate by voice and video with the other side of the wormhole.

The upshot, though, was that casual internet browsing in the Eldant Empire was still what you might call a dream within a dream.

I have to admit, I thought maybe I saw the hand of the Japanese government in this. I suspected one reason they didn’t test out more solutions for our telecommunications woes was from a fear that an Eldant people with access to the internet would learn a bit too much about what was going on in Japan and the world at large, and it might not be advantageous to Japan’s diplomatic position. Japan was hoping to exercise a certain amount of control over the information that reached Eldant. That was my speculation, anyway.

In an extreme case, what if the Eldant Empire learned about countries like America, China, or Russia—places vastly bigger than Japan—and decided it would be more profitable to trade with them? All our work here would be gone like a puff of smoke.

And then there was the fact that even by connecting just me to the internet, the risk of information leakage got that much greater. On the net these days, there are dangerous sites that will siphon the data right off your computer if you follow a bad link, places that can get you no matter how many firewalls or anti-virus programs you have. There was always a risk that something confidential might slip out. One more reason for the Japanese government to try to keep the Eldant Empire off the internet.

It simply isn’t possible, though, to “do” otaku culture today without the web. If you want to get the latest info, keep up on the trends, you have to make the rounds of a whole slew of websites and bulletin boards on a regular basis.

So what to do?

Here was our solution: I specified a handful of sites and forums, which were then downloaded wholesale onto a hard drive and shipped to me on a weekly basis. Talk about your time delays. It kept me from actively participating in any big hubbubs—including any flame wars—but, well, I would just have to deal with it.

I was resigned to the way things were. But then...

"Huh?" I muttered at my computer display.

Myusel had already left the room after bringing me tea; I was just planning to do a quick info check before going to bed.

Kanno Shougo's New Work, Angelica—The Burdened Princess, Vol. 9*, Has Been Delayed*

Publication Date Unknown

Author Hospitalized

I was on the website of a certain publisher. And that was what I was reading.

I went further into the article and discovered that just before the publication of the newest volume of *Angelica*, the author, Kanno Shougo, had been taken to the hospital, and now the book was indefinitely delayed.

"It can't be...!"

When an author misses a deadline or has to redo a draft, the publisher says the book has been delayed until "next month" or "two months from now." Publishers never say "indefinitely delayed." It makes readers think the series isn't going to continue, and sales drop off.

That was what my dad had told me, anyway. In fact, publishers were usually pretty leery of revealing any details of their authors' personal lives. They had probably mentioned the hospitalization as a way of saying, "Don't worry, we plan to continue the series, but this is beyond our control!"

Meaning...

"Was he really hospitalized? But an indefinite delay means..."

It meant they didn't know when he would be *out* of the hospital. It meant this wasn't a kidney stone or an inflamed appendix, something that would require just a short stay.

"But... But I just can't believe it..."

My imagination kept going to darker and darker places, and I couldn't stop it.

The next morning, at breakfast. We were all in the dining room as usual, eating the breakfast Myusel had made for us.

The morning scene here at the headquarters of Amutech, the trans-dimensional-first entertainment company, was apparently pretty unusual by Eldant standards. I was essentially treated like a noble here. Such "high-ranking" people didn't typically eat with their servants. But the truth was, I was just a commoner at heart, and I could never get comfortable with the idea of sitting and enjoying a meal all by myself while my maids and servants stood at attention and looked on. In my house, therefore, we all shared the table together without regard to social standing.

Anyway, a meal tastes better when you eat it together. I had spent long enough shut up in my own room, eating by myself, to appreciate that.

But this morning...

"Um... Master...?" Myusel, sitting across from me, asked hesitantly.

"Huh? Oh, yeah? What is it?" I forced myself to focus on her. "Something wrong?"

"No, it's just, er... I thought you seemed rather... distracted..."

She looked at me anxiously—no, with concern.

Ahh... Well, I definitely didn't get a ton of sleep last night...

I tried to pass it off with an ambiguous smile. "Just burning the candle at both ends, I guess. I'm a little sleepy."

"Is that all...?"

"Not gettin' enough sleep, Shinichi-sama?"

The question came from the beast girl sitting diagonally across from me: Elvia Harneiman. She was a werewolf—a kind of beast person. She was originally from the neighboring country of Bahairam, and in fact had been one of their spies. When she came to stake out our mansion, we discovered and captured her, but it turned out she was really good at drawing, so I talked to the Eldant Empire about keeping her on as our resident artist, and she ended up living here with us.

She was cheerful, energetic, and even better, she had ears and a tail that were covered in soft, fluffy fur. Not only that, she regularly wore clothes that exposed her midriff, and she had a serious chest. Much like Myusel, but

for different reasons, she was a character... er, I mean girl... that I could get seriously moe for.

Elvia also had a cute face and a genuinely infectious laugh. Okay, so she could be a bit ditzy, and occasionally her instincts took over in a way that led to trouble, but it was impossible not to like this beast girl.

"Me, neither," she said now.

"Huh? You're not sleeping well, either?"

She didn't look like someone who wasn't sleeping. In fact, she seemed to be bursting with energy this morning. In fact... were her cheeks a bit flushed? And her breathing a bit fast?

".....Oh, *that*," I said, bracing myself.

That was sort of like a human girl's "time of the month"—but instead, it was a period of being in heat that only beast people experienced. They got all hot and bothered. And Elvia had only started to experience this pretty recently, so she still had some trouble controlling it. It had actually caused her to knock me over once, and I don't mean because she bumped into me in the hallway. It's a long story, but, uh, nothing ultimately *happened* that time.

"I've been drawing, trying to let it out. But man, it just keeps me from getting any shut-eye."

"Ah... Yeah, understandable," I said with a nod.

Who hasn't experienced being too wound up to sleep? Beast people like Elvia tended to have energy to spare to begin with, so they didn't usually wear themselves out with a little physical activity and then just drop off. They really needed an outlet.

"Me, I had to deal with one of the alarms in the middle of the night last night," the girl sitting beside me said with a look of annoyance.

She was Koganuma Minori-san. A WAC—a female member of the JSDF—and my bodyguard. She was beautiful and bespectacled and big-boobed, plus she was one of those martial-artist girls. All the ingredients for yet another moe-fest, right?

The only problem was, inside, she was well and truly rotten. I don't mean she was unpleasant. I mean she was a *fujoshi*, one of those so-called "rotten girls" who adore Boys' Love, stories of guys doing you-know-what together. To be fair, that did make her a type of otaku.

"Said there was something running around the house at an incredible speed. When I saw the camera, I realized it was just Elvia, so at least I was

able to go back to sleep after that," Minori-san explained.

Since this mansion was Amutech's employee housing as well as our home, the JSDF supplied us with perimeter alarm systems, which Minori-san, as my bodyguard, could control from her smartphone.

"Werewolves, such trouble."

"I'm so sorry for you, dear."

These perspectives came from two of the house's other residents—who were also beast people, but looked nothing like Elvia. They were a lizardman couple, Brooke Darwin and his wife, Cerise Darwin. Brooke was our gardener, while Cerise helped Myusel as a maid.

I've already mentioned how different they looked from a human like me. They were bipedal and used their hands, but that was about as far as the similarities went. Appearance-wise, they really did look like giant lizards. A long time ago, I'd run into Brooke in a dark building and accidentally punched him out of sheer terror. Even now, I was confident I would freak out a little if I saw him in the dark. What kind of confidence is that, you ask? Never mind.

As imposing as the two of them looked, Brooke was a good man, dedicated and responsible, and Cerise was a hard worker. Apparently she came from pretty high up in lizardman society, and sometimes you could detect traces of an aristocratic upbringing in her, but nothing that ever caused us any grief.

The two of them had actually been living apart for a time—they had been on the cusp of what you might call divorce—but now they were both living here and were very sweet with each other (another long story). Lizardman affection looked so different from the human variety that thankfully I didn't have to be weirded out by public displays of it.

"Brooke, do you guys ever have... a time like that in your lives?"

"We do, sir. But us bein' cold-blooded," he said, "it's always from spring into summer."

"Oh, that makes sense."

So it was regular, but not in short bursts every month. Fair enough—it would be hard for people so influenced by the ambient temperature to do anything, like get it on *or* care for an egg, in the middle of winter.

"Speaking o' which, Master... Just to let you know, we may, ah, need to beg a small favor of you eventually."

"Huh? Wh-What's that? What do you need to let me know?"

Brooke didn't usually talk like this. Beside him, Cerise was nodding along.

"As I believe you'll recall, sir," he began, "we lost an egg in the past. That bein' what caused that dark stretch for me."

"Sure," I said.

The story was that Brooke had been with the army, so he hadn't been able to protect Cerise and their egg. Because of that, their children—or rather, the eggs that would have been their children—had been broken and lost to them.

"This time I'll be with them. Keep them safe. So, er..." Brooke scratched the end of his nose with one long, sharp claw. "Sooner than later, I expect m' wife will bear eggs, and when the spawn emerge, I wondered if y' might be so kind as to let them live here, too..."

"Absolutely!" I answered immediately. "I mean... a family should be together."

That was the idea, anyway. I know I'd spent a year as a shut-in, hardly seeing my own family, and now I was in another world entirely, so maybe I had no right to talk. But I thought even lizardman families would want to be with each other.

There was a pause; Brooke and Cerise looked at each other.

"What? Something wrong?"

"Oh... no," Cerise said, shaking her head. I wasn't an expert reader of lizardman expressions, but I had become accustomed enough to them that I could tell she had a sort of awkward smile on her face. "We simply didn't think it would be quite so... well, *easy* to gain your approval."

"It's not about 'easy,' it's— Oh, but since the Eldant Empire technically owns this house, do you think we'll need to ask Petralka for permission?"

"I don't think that'll be a problem," Minori-san said with a sort of grin. "She's never stopped you from moving whoever you wanted into this house before, up to and including a Bahairamanian spy. Why start now? I do think we'll have to let her know, though."

"S-Spy? Are you talkin' about me?" Elvia said, pointing to herself.

"How many other spies are there in this house?"

Minori-san had a point. Compared to letting an enemy intelligence agent live in the company headquarters, adding Brooke's children to our group should hardly cause a fuss. Partly for biological reasons, Brooke and

Cerise actually often slept outside the mansion, so we could just expand their outbuilding.

But... But...

Me, I really did have no right to talk about this subject.

I sat silently.

"Master," Myusel said, concern in her voice. "Are you sure there's nothing—"

Maybe my thoughts were showing on my face, or maybe Myusel was just that perceptive. They say elves have good ears; maybe she'd picked up on some slight tremor in my voice or something.

"Forgive me for being so forward, but, er, if there's anything I can do..."

"Shinichi-kun?" Minori-san said, looking equally mystified.

Argh... Maybe there was no point in trying to hide it.

I sighed and said, "It's just, er, I guess my dad's in the hospital or something. They said his new book is delayed indefinitely."

"What? But that means—"

This expression of surprise came from the person sitting beside me and across from Minori-san—my assistant, Ayasaki Hikaru. He was a special one: he had long, black hair, and wore Gothic Lolita outfits with such regularity that I half assumed he slept in them, too.

He was originally dispatched here by the Japanese government to be Amutech's second general manager—a replacement for me with my inconvenient tendency to ignore what the higher-ups wanted. That made him, in some sense, my enemy, a potential usurper. But eventually (yet another long story), we had made peace with each other, or at least reached a sort of detente.

Now, Hikaru-san looked in my face as he said, "Shinichi-san, is your dad, by chance, Kanno Shougo?"

Man, that was fast.

Come to think of it, Hikaru-san also kept an eye on the net on that one-week delay.

"The author of *Angelica—The Burdened Princess*, right?" he asked.

"Er, uh, actually... yes," I said.

Minori-san and Hikaru-san both knew my dad was a light-novel author, and Minori-san might even have known his pen name already, but I had

never told Hikaru-san the nitty-gritty details. Of course, Eduardo at school didn't know about it, and neither did Myusel or any of the others.

"Huh? Wh-What did you say?" Myusel and the others asked, flabbergasted.

"Oh my God," Hikaru-san said, looking at them. "Have you been hiding it?"

"No, uh, not *hiding* it, exactly..."

I had just sort of... never had a chance to tell them.

"You know about light novels, right?" Hikaru-san said to my housemates. "Shinichi's dad, he writes those. He's almost as prolific as Ebihara Keisuke, the guy who writes *A Far Song*."

"Is that true?!"

Myusel, Elvia, and Brooke all looked shocked.

I must have been right about Minori-san knowing about my dad already, because she didn't look surprised; instead she asked, "Why did he go into the hospital? Did you get this off the internet?"

"Yeah. His new book was indefinitely delayed, and the reason they gave was hospitalization."

"I see," she said, crossing her arms. "And you were so worried you couldn't sleep?"

"Worried? I mean... Well, yeah, I was." I scratched my cheek. I felt embarrassed somehow, as if I might come across like some kid who's never been away from home before. Was this—how do I put it?—a belated fit of chuunibyouism? Was I at that age where I wanted to pretend like, *I don't care whether my parents live or die!*

In any event, I went on: "It was the 'indefinite' part that bothered me... If he had a kidney stone or appendicitis or something, a problem they could fix with a few days in the hospital, wouldn't the book just be put off for a month or two?"

Hikaru-san frowned. "So you're thinking... it might be something potentially fatal?"

Myusel all but jumped out of her chair.

"Then you have to hurry back to Ja-pan and—!" She cut herself off, looking startled. Brooke and Elvia looked at each other, too.

Cerise hadn't been around at the time, but Myusel, Brooke, and Elvia would all have remembered the time I had been attacked by a special forces

unit of the JSDF, dispatched from the Japan side. Whether they'd been seeking to kidnap or simply assassinate me had never been established.

Although there had been some uncomfortable moments since then, nothing had ever happened to make me really think the Japanese government was after me again—at the very least because they didn't want to ruin their diplomatic relations with the Holy Eldant Empire.

Having said that, Hikaru-san's arrival had made it all too clear that the government wanted me out of the picture. Meaning...

"If you go back to Japan, they might really kill you this time," Hikaru-san said, calmly taking a sip of tea.

He was right. There was a nonzero chance that would happen. There was also the possibility that once I was home, they wouldn't let me return to the Eldant Empire. There was even the chance that they simply wouldn't allow me to go home at all.

That didn't leave me with a lot of options. My dad was in the hospital, but there was virtually nothing I could do. That's why I'd wanted to stay quiet about it.

"Well, it, you know—it'll be all right," I said. I had no idea what would be all right, or how, but I didn't want to worry Myusel and the others any more than I had to. "We don't know—maybe he just decided to skip his deadline. People joke all the time about how a manga must have stopped running because the author suddenly got comically sick..."

Although, in reality, I thought it was a lot more common to miss a deadline because you were suddenly in the hospital for real.

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about," I concluded, and tried my best to smile at Myusel.

Breakfast was over, and I was making my preparations to go to Eldant Castle and then to school.

I was in my room changing, when it suddenly occurred to me that the clothes I was putting on were ones I had brought with me from Japan. It was the so-called "recruit suit" I'd worn to the hiring interview for Amutech.

It was also a reminder of what had given me the push to join this company: my parents informing me that if I didn't want to go back to

school or be kicked out of the house, my only other option was to get a job. The suit, needless to say, wasn't the fanciest: it probably hadn't cost more than 30,000 yen.

I stood there silently for a moment. Truth be told, until now, I had gone out of my way not to think too much about my family in Japan. It was going on a year since I had come here, and I tried not to wonder how my parents and Shizuki must feel about my disappearance.

Were they worried? Had they already given me up for dead? Or were they downright relieved that their good-for-nothing son, their embarrassing older brother, had shown himself out? Either of those latter two seemed like possibilities, but the more I thought about them, the uglier the thoughts got whirling around in my head.

And so I shut my family out of my consciousness. But not thinking about them didn't mean they suddenly stopped existing.

I sighed and started doing up the buttons of my shirt.

That was when I heard a voice just outside the door.

"Master?" It was Myusel. "Um, have you finished changing?"

"Er... yeah, it's okay," I said as I did up the last button and double checked that my fly was zipped.

"Then... May I have a moment...?"

"Hm? Yeah, sure..."

"Thank you, Master," she said, and came into the room.

This was all a little unusual. When I had first arrived here, Myusel had tried to help me get dressed, but I'd told her that was just too embarrassing for me, so she didn't usually come to my room this early. Usually she would do a quick clean-up from breakfast, then wait by the front door to see us off for the day.

"What's up, Myusel?"

"Well, I... ahem..."

Now that she was in my room, she seemed hesitant. Like she had something to say, but couldn't bring herself to say it.

"Something you wanted to talk about?"

"Yes... I—I apologize if I'm overstepping myself but..." She screwed up her courage and looked at me. "Shinichi-sama, I... Shinichi-sama, I really think you should g—go back home... sir."

"Myusel...?"

I was completely surprised: this was so sudden. And from Myusel, of all people. She had rarely if ever specifically told me to do something before. Maybe she thought that, as my maid, it would be improper to go against my expressed opinion. She had occasionally offered her own perspectives on things, and once in a great while she had made requests of me. But the words "you *should*"? I didn't think I had ever heard them from Myusel before.

I was sure she knew that—it was probably why she had hesitated. But now...

"A ch-child and his parents," she said, obviously summoning up all her courage to get the words out, afraid that I might reprimand her for saying too much, "they... Well, I d-don't necessarily think a family has to live together... but I do think... I think that if there's anger, or resentment... they ought to... to try to patch things up..."

"Myusel..."

"I m-met my own mother, and I feel like... like we at least came to understand each other. And that was... it was thanks to you, Shinichi-sama..."

"Me? How?"

A bit back, just before Hikaru-san had arrived, Myusel had been reunited with her birth mother, who had come from quite some ways away to visit. As a half-elf, a "mixed-blood," Myusel had been shunned in her mother's family, the beginning of a difficult childhood. So when her mother had reappeared more than a decade later, Myusel had been understandably uncertain at first, but eventually came to accept her mother.

And now she was saying that was somehow something I'd done. To be honest, I didn't remember doing anything special. I guess maybe I had spoken to Myusel's mom a little bit...

Anyway, that wasn't the point now.

"I'm really, really grateful for that," Myusel said. "And I want... Shinichi-sama, I want you not to have any regrets, either... I don't want you to have to just grin and bear anything..."

She seemed to be looking for the exact words she wanted, and her speech dissolved into a flurry of "um"s and "ahh"s.

"I see," I said after a moment, a small smile on my face. "Maybe you're right."

I have an unfortunate tendency to let my imagination take me to the worst possible places, and to try to keep myself from getting hurt as much as possible. Could it be—just possibly—that my mom and dad were actually really upset that I was gone? Could even Shizuki be a little lonely without me?

"Thank you, Myusel."

"Oh, don't thank me..." Myusel's face went red and she looked at the ground.

Arrrgh! How freakin' cute can one maid be?!

In spite of all this, there was one thing I was still leery about. It was the specter Hikaru-san had raised of the Japanese government's involvement.

Would they let me go home just because I wanted to? And if they did, would I be safe once I was there? And if I was, would I ever be able to come back to Eldant?

Questions two and three especially nagged at me. I had Minori-san as my bodyguard, but ultimately, she was a soldier in the JSDF—she had to follow government orders if it came down to it. I wasn't sure if she could still guard me back in Japan, and if the government relieved her of duty, well, I didn't want to make her keep protecting me as some sort of personal favor.

I had to find a way to keep myself safe without relying on Minori-san.

"Um, Shinichi-sama." Myusel looked up just a little. She looked even more firmly resolved than before... but why? While I was still trying to puzzle it out, she spoke up. "If... If we can get permission, I would like to... I *will*... do my best to protect you, Shinichi-sama...!"

"Huh?" I said, my eyes turning to pinpoints.

About half an hour later, I was at Holy Eldant Castle to make my report to the empress, Petralka an Eldant III, as I did every day.

And even though I saw it so often, my mind still boggled at the size of this building. The hallways stretched on and on, supported by gigantic pillars. The place had the overall look of a standard fantasy castle, but it had been created by hollowing out a mountain, and the scale was absolutely immense. The ceilings vaulted high overhead, the corridors stretched to either side, and the whole place was more than big enough to get lost in.

Minori-san and I walked with the others through this gigantic castle, heading for an audience room.

It was our basic complement: me, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Myusel. Myusel was our on-again, off-again teacher of Japanese at the school, so sometimes she joined us and sometimes not. It wasn't especially typical for her to show up for these audiences. Yes, she and Her Majesty were on good terms, so Myusel was allowed in the audience chamber, but in general it was all but unheard-of that a mere maid should meet the empress face-to-face.

And just as we were walking along...

"Hullo there." A middle-aged man appeared from the shadow of one of the giant pillars. He was the very image of a mid-level bureaucrat—hair parted in the middle, his somehow worn-looking suit the color of dead leaves. His eyes were constantly squinted as if he were laughing, and in the same way, his lips seemed to be curled in a smile at all times.

This was Matoba Jinzaburou, an employee of the Japanese government whose official title was Chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau. A high-ranking member of the organization that handled all the details of bringing the Holy Eldant Empire and Japan together, and also the one who attended to most of the administrative work involved in running Amutech.

In other words, he was sort of an enemy and also sort of a friend to me—it was a weird place to be in. He had said he was fond of me personally, but I didn't know how far to trust him.

He traveled frequently between Japan and the alternate world, so no sooner did I think he was staying at our mansion for a while than he would disappear for days at a time. As of today, it had been nearly a week since I'd seen Matoba-san last.

And what did he ask me?

"Are Amutech's activities going smoothly?" His face was like a mask with that unflinching smile.

It was just what you might call a polite question, so I decided to give him an answer that wouldn't make any waves. "Sure, smooth enough."

"That's good to hear. And your activities—"

"Matoba-san," I said, interrupting him. "I'd like to go back to Japan, temporarily. As soon as I can. Is that possible?"

“Hmm?” He raised an eyebrow. Then he tapped his finger thoughtfully against his chin for a moment, before he said, “I don’t know what’s prompted this urgency, Shinichi-kun, but there’s something you need to understand.” There was a note of frustration in his voice. “I can hardly imagine you’ve forgotten that as far as the Japanese government is concerned, you’re practically a traitor. And you expect to return home safely?”

“...Thought so.”

I had sort of expected as much. Or, to be more precise, I had expected the gist of it—but it was unusual for Matoba-san to be quite so direct. Maybe I had really caught him off guard saying I wanted to go home.

But then Matoba-san shrugged a little, his tone softening. “Then too, the leadership has changed. It was the hawks’ PM who went after you, but now it’s the doves who run the Home Ministry... I don’t think there’s anyone left who’s specifically out for your life.”

“Well, that’s... comforting.”

“Even the government isn’t monolithic. There’s some bickering going on—some feel that relations with Eldant should be handled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while others argue that because it’s contiguous with our nation, it belongs under the purview of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. The Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau was created specifically to prevent infighting from bringing things to a stalemate, but here we are...”

“Oh...”

I’d never expected to hear Matoba-san complaining to *me*. I guess I wasn’t the only one with problems.

“There’s another factor,” he said, his tone changing a little. “We *are* beginning to see some profit from your efforts, minimal though it is at the moment. And given we had something of a failure with Hikaru-kun...”

Hikaru-san just shrugged.

I assumed the “failure” Matoba-san was referring to was an overeager effort to introduce card games and ero games to the alternate world. It had happened at the behest of the Japanese government, sure, but ultimately the Eldant Empire took issue with the entire thing, and it had to be judged a mistake from the perspective of “cultural exchange.”

“I think they might be coming to appreciate that you have a certain talent for this. However...”

He trailed off.

“However what?” I asked.

“This is an extreme possibility,” Matoba-san said, turning so that he was facing the door of the audience chamber. “But even if you were able to go back to Japan, there is always the possibility you wouldn’t be able to return to Eldant. Or that you might meet with some kind of ‘accident’ while at home. Yes?”

Yes. That was definitely a problem.

“On that note,” I said, “I’d like to request protection.”

“Protection? Not from Koganuma-san?” Matoba-san suddenly looked very serious.

“That’s right,” I said, “from someone outside the JSDF.”

I found myself deeply entertained by Matoba-san’s discomfort.

“Welcome and well come, Kanou Shinichi,” the empress said from before us.

Her Majesty Petralka an Eldant III. Her name and title were a mouthful, the sort of thing that might normally evoke images of a bearded old man—but the person sitting on the elegant throne at the head of the audience chamber was an absolutely adorable young girl.

Her hair was silver, and her eyes the color of emeralds. She looked like a doll carved with utmost care by an absolute master. She kind of made you imagine that she didn’t have body odor, or that she never used the bathroom—it was that sort of fantastical sweetness.

I practically just wanted to tuck her under my arm and take her home with me.

Of course, if I did that, it would be a one-way ticket to getting my head chopped off right then and there. So I didn’t.

But anyway...

“You seem in most rude health this day, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, do stop. You’re far too formal.”

Hey, it was Petralka who had started with the formality. Normally she just called me Shinichi. I just thought maybe it was some kind of day to be formal to each other or something, and played along.

“Are there any significant changes in Amutech’s business, or the running of the school?”

“None. But on that note, Your Majesty...” I decided to stick to “friendly mode” as I said, “Truth be told... I’d like to ask to go home temporarily.”

““To go home?””

Huh? Why was I hearing her twice? I turned a questioning gaze on the two advisors standing one to each side of her throne: the handsome knight Garius en Cordobal, and the elderly, bearded, but still somehow adorable Prime Minister Zahar. But they both shook their heads as if to say, “Wasn’t me.”

That had to mean...

“What is the meaning of this, Shinichi?!” demanded Petralka, appearing from behind the throne.

.....Huh?

So the person sitting on the chair now was—

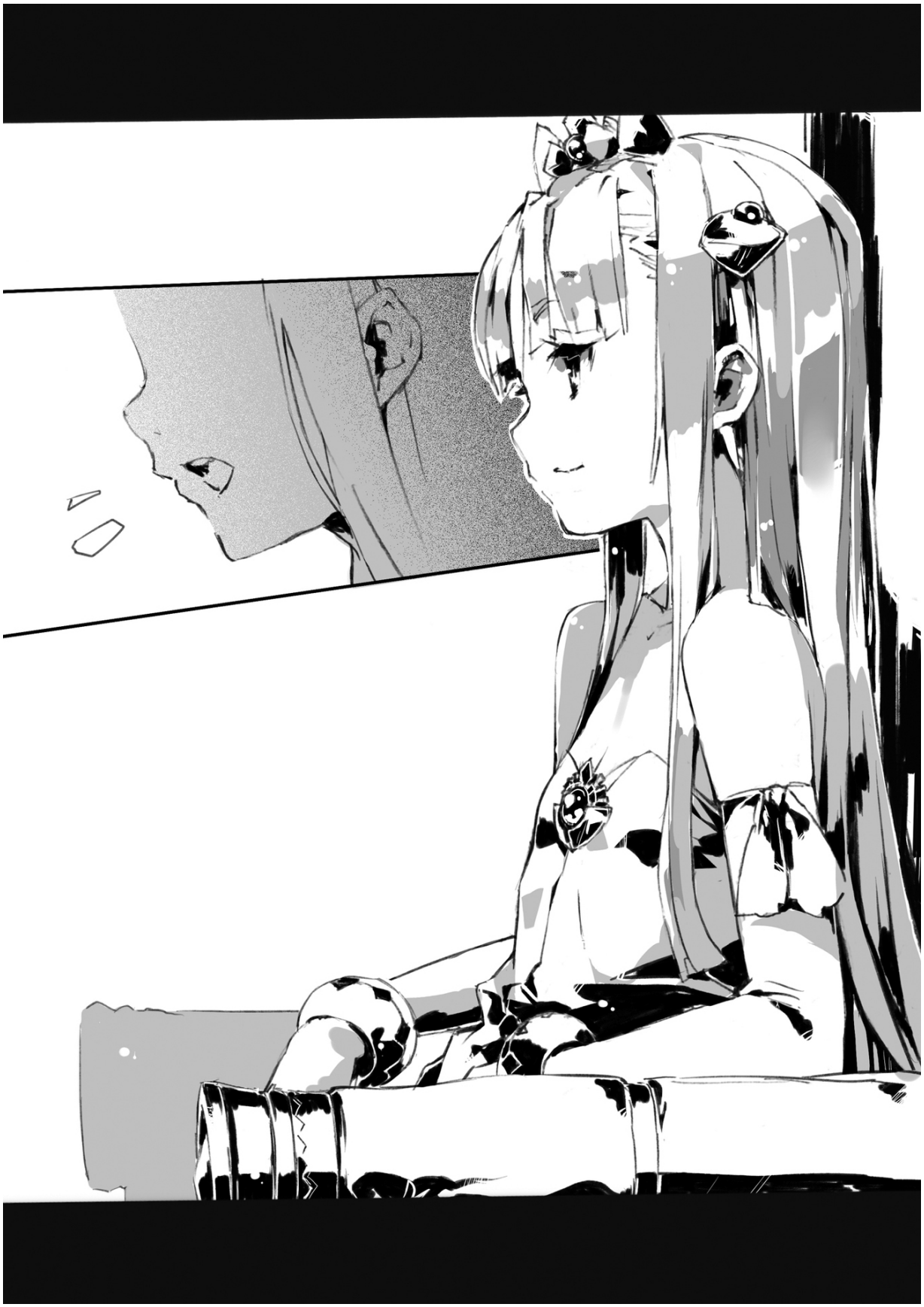
“The doll?!”

“Indeed! If you yourself did not notice, Shinichi, then there should be no more problems!”

Petralka, smiling now as if my confusion amused her, gave the person on the throne a fond pat.

You got it: it was a doll, a body double.

Not too long ago, I had introduced a plan to get Petralka a stand-in. This doll looked exactly like her, but unlike a normal doll, it did more than just sit around. With magical help, it could adopt facial expressions, speak aloud, and even sing and dance if we wanted it to. It was really something.



The plan had briefly been hampered by some quirks in the personality of the "magical technician" we'd recruited to operate the doll, but from the look of things, we were well beyond any issues now.

"Lauron, come forward!"

"...Y-Yes, ma'am."

At Petralka's command, the operator emerged from the shadows of the audience chamber. It was Lauron Selioz, a dwarf. She was small and cute, like most dwarves, but she tended to prefer a plain appearance—she used to be a craftsman in an underground workshop, so she kept her hair short and didn't wear any makeup or other ornaments. The reserved look was nice on her, though.

"Huh? Lauron...?"

Why was I so surprised? Her entire appearance had changed.

Now she was wearing a maid uniform. It looked a lot like the one Myusel wore, although it was probably made from a different material; it looked awfully expensive. It seemed to be wearing Lauron more than the other way around.

I guess if you were going to serve an empress, you had to be ready to wear a maid uniform. But it was enough that I almost hadn't recognized her—in fact, I *hadn't* recognized her.

She was extremely cute. Before, she'd always worn something like hotpants, and combined with her short hair it had given her a sort of boyish look. I was astonished to realize how much a person could change just by putting on a skirt. No, wait. Was this the sheer power of a maid uniform...?!

"It is perfectly natural for a maid to be by our side, is it not?" Petralka said.

Like I said, Lauron was recruited to work Petralka's body double, but however talented she might be, even she couldn't operate the doll from another room, or from dozens of meters away or whatever. Instead, they'd come up with a ruse, dressing her in a maid uniform so no one would wonder why she was attending the empress. In addition to her royal guard, Petralka was always attended by several dwarven maids, so Lauron looked right at home.

"Now we can entrust our public duties to Lauron at any time and go goof off!"

"Your Majesty..." Garius said reprovingly.

“Yes, yes, we know. It is only a joke,” Petralka replied jovially. Garius, however, sighed, his lovely face still dark. He probably guessed that the joke might stop being a joke one day. I had developed the body-double plan in part, though, to help relieve Petralka of some of the burden of her public appearances, and Garius and Zahar had both agreed to that.

“Still,” Petralka said, “someday we would love to visit this ‘holy land,’ Akiba, in Ja-pan. If only—” Then she stopped. “Shinichi, what did you say a moment ago? You spoke of going home?” She seemed to be only just remembering my request.

“Uh, yeah. Actually, my dad—he’s been hospitalized.”

“Is this true?!” Petralka exclaimed, more forcefully than I’d expected.

Oh...

It was then that I remembered: Petralka had lost her own parents at a young age. After a bout of political infighting, they’d been poisoned. So maybe it hadn’t been the best idea to bring up my dad in front of her.

“That would weigh heavily on the heart,” Petralka said. “It is only natural to wish to go home.” She crossed her arms.

“But... Shinichi.” Garius spoke up from beside her. “Do you not understand? Are you not in a rather tenuous position vis-à-vis your country of Ja-pan?”

“Believe me, I know,” I said.

Garius was one of Eldant’s military leaders, and this proved it—that was the first thing he thought of. He understood that I occupied an unusual place in Japan-Eldant relations, one I held in part because there wasn’t much my country could do about it. But he grasped quicker than anyone else that going back to Japan could mean risk—even risk of assassination for me.

“As far as it goes, a change in leadership means that the prime minister who bore a special grudge against him is no longer part of the government,” Matoba-san said. “I wouldn’t expect a kill squad to move against him immediately.”

“What is this ‘change in leadership’ you refer to?” Garius asked.

“It’s rather like when one emperor or empress is succeeded by another,” Matoba-san explained. “Our current prime minister is somewhat less inclined to violence...”

“But this does not mean that *all* of those involved have left the government—does it, Matoba?” Petralka said, unmistakable irony in her

voice. Given that Matoba-san, the face of the Japanese government as far as the Eldant Empire was concerned, had remained in his post, the acerbic touch was understandable.

"I've actually got sort of an idea about the safety thing," I said, glancing at Myusel. "I'd like to take someone along for protection. Someone from this side."

"What? You mean—someone from our nation. Someone besides Minori?"

"Yeah, that's right," I nodded.

"We understand—you seek our help in doing this thing. Very well, Shinichi; allow us to handle this. We shall immediately deputize a division of knights to guard you more impenetrably than a wall of steel, to keep—"

"No, no, not what I meant!" I shook my head quickly. If I went around accompanied by a squadron of knights in full armor, confidentiality was going to go out the window. The Japanese government would never allow it, anyway. "I'd like to bring Myusel—and Elvia, even though she's not technically from Eldant."

"Come again? You wish to take Myusel?" Petralka said, looking at my maid. "And the beast girl, is it? A werewolf is one thing, perhaps, but Myusel..."

Petralka's face clouded over, and no wonder. Just recently, there had been a commotion over a "magical vacuum" that had occurred, revealing that elves and dwarves all but collapsed in places without magical power. Myusel was only half elf, but it was easy to imagine the lack of magic in a place like Japan would affect her; it would at least keep her from working as hard as she normally did.

However...

"I'll bring a sprite bottle, and a stone with a magical charge," Myusel said.

Certain minerals, it seemed, had the ability to store magical energy, and in Eldant it was possible to use them like a magical battery. On top of that, because magical power could evidently be constrained by simple physical barriers, a large glass bottle was enough to transport the sprites that produced magical energy, kind of like the sprite equivalent of an oxygen tank. The dwarves frequently carried items like these in their underground workshops, where magic could be scarce.

It was a simple concept: if you were going somewhere there wasn't enough magic, just bring some along.

Because Myusel was only half elf, moreover, she wouldn't immediately collapse in a magic-less area, unlike full-blooded elves and dwarves. Even without magical support, she would just get very tired.

"If I bring enough, it might even be possible to actually use magic spells there..."

"It may be as you say. But... hrm." Petralka crossed her arms as if thinking about something.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Zahar turned to me. "In that case, Shinichi-dono, what do you intend to do about the running of Amutech, and of your school, during your absence? Will activities simply be suspended for the duration?"

That was a perfectly legitimate question. And I was ready with an answer.

"Hikaru-san is going to fill in for me at Amutech while I'm away."

"...Say what?"

The surprised response came from none other than Hikaru-san himself. He blinked his eyes girlishly (or was that technically boyishly?) at me and I nodded, suppressing a smile. "Won't you?" I asked, pressing the point.

"Wait, won't I—*what*? Shinichi-san, you..."

Ooh, I had him confused. Call it my very small form of payback.

Hikaru-san knew perfectly well that he had been sent here originally as my replacement, so he must have been a little surprised at how readily I was handing over control to him. But from my perspective...

"You're very capable, Hikaru-san. I'm confident I can expect the best from you. Even without me here, I think—no, I *know*—that you'll do great. Maybe even better than me."

Hikaru-san listened in silence, his eyes the size of saucers.

I don't mean to sound smug, but I felt like I was starting to get a handle on Hikaru-san's personality. Judging by what I'd heard from Myusel, when someone expected something of Hikaru-san, placed their trust in him, he instinctively did his best to meet those expectations. That impulse had driven even the incident with the card and ero games.

He didn't have any special desire to usurp my place. That was simply what had been expected of him by the Japanese government, and he had dutifully tried to do it.

“G-Gee, you do?” Hikaru-san looked at the ground and blushed a little. “If you expect all that, I g-guess I’ll just have to do my best not to disappoint you...”

...Wait, what?

Geez, this was just way too cute...! Was he—was he actually being bashful?

No, stop! Don’t be deceived, Kanou Shinichi—Hikaru-san is a guy! Bashful or not, you don’t want to go down that road! Not one step! All you’ll do is make Minori-san really happy!

As I engaged in this desperate mental shouting, the conversation around me went on.

“Whatever we end up doing,” Garius said—he was frowning a bit, like he was annoyed, but why?—“if it should happen that Shinichi did not come back here, it would be an international incident.” His almond-shaped eyes fixed on Matoba-san.

He wasn’t wrong. The truth was, I wore one of the magical rings that represented the rights of citizenship in the Eldant Empire, even if I had come by mine in a somewhat unusual way. I was treated virtually as one of their own. In light of my job as what amounted to a diplomat, I was shown a deference usually reserved for nobles.

Garius was making a none-too-subtle threat to Matoba-san, indicating that if I was killed, the Holy Eldant Empire would not respond kindly.

That was Garius for you, knight and minister. I was awfully grateful.

“Understood,” Petralka said finally with a nod and a sigh. “We see we could not stop you if we wished, nor would it be right to prevent your going home with a parent in crisis. We shall requisition a magical stone of the highest quality and a sprite bottle with the utmost urgency. Wait a short while. And Myusel, be certain you protect your master.”

“I will... And thank you, Your Majesty!” Myusel bowed deeply to Petralka, and the rest of us followed suit.

A hyperspace portal.

It sounds so sci-fi, but on the top of a small hill, in a cleft in the earth, there it was.

I had expected it to be more... like something you'd see in an anime. You know, flashes of light, the scenery distorting around it—but everything on the hilltop looked perfectly normal. If I had to name something that seemed other than ordinary, I would say it was less the hole itself than the area around it. Specifically, the Eldant Empire had built a fence around the vicinity and installed a small guardhouse. Inside the fence was a gray steel crane the JSDF had put there.

The crane was for transporting goods and people through the portal. What actually happened was that the crane raised and lowered a sort of box, like a gondola system or an extremely simple elevator.

Beside the crane was what looked like a massive piece of stained glass, or at least some big sheet constructed of semi-translucent pieces. This must have been the "gate" Petralka had mentioned, a barrier made of glass and magical stones intended to keep magic from escaping to Japan. It had been set to one side temporarily so that we could transit.

"This way, please." JSDF servicemembers led us into the gondola. "Us" included me, Myusel, Elvia, Minori-san, Matoba-san, and a bevy of luggage. Petralka really had worked hard on our behalf, and a couple of boxes containing the expensive magical stone and sprite container accompanied us, too.

The gondola itself struck me as the strangest thing of all. It was a sort of box that hung suspended between two steel frames. The box was roughly the size of an industrial elevator—heck, maybe they had just grabbed an elevator wholesale to use here.

The box, it seemed, could rotate lengthwise between the frames. Maybe that was so a little rocking during the trip wouldn't send things flying. Then again, apparently the portal led to a similar rift in the earth on the Japan side—maybe gravity switched around halfway through or something.

"Huh," I offered. "Not very fancy in here."

"Well, it is just for transport," Matoba-san said.

The interior reinforced the image of an industrial elevator, its furnishings limited to enough chairs to seat all of us. It felt a lot like getting in a Ferris wheel car.

Incidentally, boxes like these were only used when transporting people, and objects small enough for people to hold. Bigger things were suspended from wires directly and passed through the portal. That's how stuff like the frame of the LAV, the JSDF's chosen mode of transport, got across.

AED

Myusel and Elvia came in almost hesitantly.

“Don’t... Don’t mind me...”

“Wow... This is kinda... wow.”

For purposes of safety, the JSDF helped us fasten the seat belts on our chairs, then brought in luggage to fill the rest of the space. There were three duffel bags and backpacks stuffed with our changes of clothes and other necessities, along with the two large boxes, just this side of too big for an adult to handle. Each item was secured with a rubber strap.

“Shinichi-sama?” Myusel asked, looking at me a little puzzled.

“Huh? What?”

“Oh, nothing. You were just... smiling a little...”

“Oh, sorry about that. I know now’s not really the time, but I’m kind of excited.”

The last time I’d passed through the hyperspace tunnel, I’d been drugged to sleep, so I had no idea what was involved. Climbing into the gondola like this, I felt like I was going on a sort of adventure. Plus I had Myusel and Elvia and Minori-san with me, beautiful girls all around. (Just pretend Matoba-san wasn’t there.)

If that wasn’t enough to make me grin, well, then I wasn’t an otaku.

The PA speaker in the gondola crackled. “Beginning transit.”

A second later, I had a strange sensation, like I was floating. I assumed that was the box being picked up and then put into the hole. There were no windows, though, so I couldn’t be sure.

Then the gondola was falling. I could tell because of the slight but persistent floating feeling. It was almost like being suspended in water—although thankfully, I could breathe normally.

Myusel and Elvia didn’t say a word; maybe they were feeling anxious. I definitely was, and I didn’t talk, either.

Minori-san was fiddling with something on her phone. And Matoba-san—he had a book open and was reading, like a salaryman on his commute. That was the sort of calm you could only get by making this trip a whole bunch of times.

“Eek!” Myusel gave a little shout, and I tensed, too, as a really weird sensation passed through me. It was like the “direction” of the floating had reversed, a bizarre feeling like up and down had suddenly changed places. That might be something astronauts knew about, but as an earth-dweller, it wasn’t something I had ever expected to experience. It was like everything

had suddenly flipped around, turned upside down. Although nothing had obviously changed in the gondola...

"Okay. We've switched over to being pulled by the Japan side," Minori-san said.

Evidently, until halfway through the portal the gondola was "lowered" from the Eldant side, afterwhich wires attached from the Japanese end began to pull the gondola up.

In other words, we were making our approach to Japan...

"Myusel," I said to the half-elf girl beside me. "You okay? Any trouble? Not feeling tired?"

"No... Not at all," Myusel said, shaking her head.

Huh? But she wasn't using the magic stone or the sprite bottle yet. How could she not be tired? Was there still some magical energy left in the gondola? Or was some of the energy that had been sucked into the portal still here?

Come to think of it... what *was* magical energy?

I started to wonder: we'd slapped the name "magical energy" on this phenomenon, so we felt like we understood it, but we didn't have any idea what it actually was. Apparently it existed within people's bodies, but also in the surrounding atmosphere, and by letting out the stuff inside yourself and mixing it with the stuff outside, you could achieve magical effects... Anyway, that was my understanding.

Given that magical energy seemed to just float around in the atmosphere, and that it could be contained using glass, it seemed to be a little different from the mental power or *ki* energy so common in manga and anime. There were also racial differences in magical aptitude, like how lizardmen could use interpreter rings but not actual magic spells.

As I busied myself ruminating on all this, though, Matoba-san closed his book and said, "Anytime now, I expect."

Almost immediately after that, the floating sensation vanished. The gondola had stopped moving.

That meant...

Someone in a forest-green JSDF uniform, presumably stationed at the garrison here, opened the door of the gondola and smiled at us.

"You've arrived safely. Welcome home. And to our visitors, welcome to Japan."

Chapter Two: I’m... Going Home

Going back to Japan.

When I thought about those words, I had only ever pictured actually going to my house, so maybe I had been a bit naïve in imagining what was entailed in getting back home from an entirely separate world.

And now came the practicalities...

“Huh?”

Some JSDF soldiers led us out of the gondola and directly into a nearby prefab hut. In fact, it turned out the entire entrance to the portal was enclosed in a warehouse-like structure, and we were going into a smaller building contained within. I guess you could say we had set foot in Japan, but not yet breathed the air.

“Is this... a medical inspection?” I asked.

“Well, we did just come back from another world,” Matoba-san replied with a wry smile as he shrugged off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve.

The inside of the prefab building looked like a doctor’s office, and there was even someone in a white coat—probably a JSDF medical technician—standing there with a hypodermic needle in hand.

“A blood test is standard procedure,” Matoba-san said as the needle plunged into his arm and the syringe slowly filled with blood.

With mounting dread, I turned around—and found Myusel and Elvia looking practically ready for a fight. Elvia in particular looked like she might just pounce on Matoba-san or the health worker at any time.

“Whazzat?” she asked. “What’re they doin’?”

“And I’d better like the answer...” Myusel grabbed the sprite bottle from its bag with her left hand.

If she broke that bottle, the immediate area would fill with magical energy. There was obviously some around already, maybe left over from whatever had gotten sucked through the portal, because the magic rings were still working—add a bottle’s worth of sprites to that, and Myusel would probably be able to summon up some pretty serious attack power.

“Whoa, wait, wait just a second,” I said.

These girls didn't know what a health checkup was, let alone a hypodermic needle—to them, the technician was just a villain randomly stabbing people.

"Matoba-san, they aren't going to just poison me right here or anything, are they?" I asked, simultaneously trying to calm down the girls and feel out the situation.

"It's merely a health inspection, I assure you. After all, nobody knows exactly what diseases one might contract in the other world."

"I guess that's understandable," I said.

"Honestly, we don't think there's any special fear of airborne diseases. But others that spread slowly through human contact—think AIDS—could still be out there. We can't rule out the possibility that any of you are carriers, nor myself, of course. Hence why we have our blood tested each time we come back through the portal. It's routine by now. We'll have the results in an hour or so."

He sounded practically mellow. I glanced at Minori-san, and she gave me a little nod. It looked like she was already familiar with this procedure.

"You say it's just a blood draw, but what if the needle is dipped in poison?" I asked.

"You mean the disposable, mass-produced hypodermic needle?" Matoba-san and the health worker both grinned a little.

To be fair, they were doing the blood draws with disposables from a medical supplies company so big even I had heard of them, and the needles came out of sealed packages. You had to open a new one for each draw, then throw it away when you were done.

"If you're still that worried, maybe you'd like to borrow a scalpel and make a cut yourself? It's all the same to us as long as we can get a little blood," the tech offered.

Meanwhile, Minori-san had rolled up her sleeve and stood in front of the tech, who tore open a new needle package and started the blood draw...

We looked at each other.

"All right," I said. "Um, what about Myusel and Elvia?"

"They would be included," Matoba-san said. "In fact, they could be threatened by diseases that mean virtually nothing to the rest of us, due to a lack of immunity. We would love to do full medical exams on them in the interest of making vaccines or discovering other treatments."

I guess that made sense—hadn't the Martians in H. G. Wells' classic SF tale *War of the Worlds* been destroyed by the common cold or something?

Anyway, we didn't have a choice. I turned to Elvia and Myusel and said, "So, uh... I guess this is something everybody has to do? Do you guys even understand what a communicable disease is? If we have any, they don't want us to bring them into Japan, so they have to check us to see if there are any in our bodies."

"Hmm..." Myusel and Elvia looked at each other. It didn't seem like this was making much sense to them.

"Look, anyway," I said, "all they want is to draw a little blood. They'll stick you with a needle like that, and it'll sort of pinch a little, but just roll with it and it'll be over in a minute."

"Um, o-okay."

"Yeah, all right."

Both girls nodded. The technician drew blood from me, then Elvia, then Myusel with complete confidence. My friends from the other world understandably squeaked a little when the needle went in, but there was no crying or fighting, and the blood draw ended successfully.

"We appreciate your cooperation," the tech said. "We'll be running a few other tests—checking your weight, doing an x-ray, and so on. After that's all done, you'll find some clothes to change into in the next room. Just pick whatever you like. Meanwhile, we'll be fast-tracking the results of these blood draws." Then the tech left the building.

The rest of the tests followed, and then we went into the next room, and just as the technician had said, a fairly wide selection of clothing was hanging there. There were a handful of JSDF uniforms, certainly, but the majority of the stuff was actually civilian clothing.

"Remember that the hyperspace tunnel and this whole facility are top secret," Minori-san said, grabbing an outfit off the rack. "It would look suspicious for Mount Fuji to be crawling with soldiers, so we usually change into civilian clothing."

"Oh... That makes sense."

"You can pass, Shinichi-kun, but Myusel and Elvia will need to change. Elvia especially."

"Why me?" the beast girl asked, her eyes wide.

"The ears... and the tail."

"...Er?" Elvia put one hand over her ears and the other on her tail.

Hey. That was a pretty cute pose. Elvia was usually so freewheeling, I didn't get to see her looking embarrassed or self-conscious much, and it was sort of sweet.

"Maybe something like this?" Minori-san said, holding up a hooded half-coat and a cap lined with some kind of fake fur. Both excellent "ear hiders."

She passed the coat to Elvia and the hat to Myusel. "Try this on, Myusel."

"Uh, all right."

"As for the rest of your outfit..."

"Um, can I not go out like this?" Myusel asked. "I made some adjustments to my uniform before we left the mansion. I added some places to keep magic rocks or sprites..."

"Ah..." Minori-san stopped and thought about that for a moment. Then she said, "Okay. For the time being, we can just pretend you're one of those slightly 'off' kids who cosplays constantly."

Wait, are we really going with that?!

I resisted the urge to interject my smart remark—as long as we could keep Myusel's ears hidden, then we could pass her off as "some foreign kid." Anyway, I knew from when I had first met her that she could hide her ears pretty effectively with her twintails. A large-ish hat would complete the deception.

With Elvia, though, we might not get away so easily. She was going to have to actually change clothes.

"Okay, well, I'll wait outside," I said, heading for the door.

"No, you can't!" The objection came from, of all people, Elvia herself. "I'm s'posed to be your bodyguard, Shinichi-sama! I'm not supposed to take my eyes off you!"

"Well, look, I've got Myusel and everything..."

"It takes time to come up with an offensive spell! If you need to respond in an instant, I'm your girl!"

"Well, I mean, that's true, but..."

So what was I supposed to do?

"It won't take me long to change, Shinichi-sama. I'd rather you were here."

"Look, I just don't think that's... appropriate?" I looked to Minori-san for salvation.

“You’re worried about this *now*?” Minori-san sounded downright exasperated “You all changed in the same room when you were doing the movie, right?”

Argh, this wasn’t getting me anywhere. Back during filming, it had been me and Myusel and Petralka, too, and I had been able to somehow find a place to put my eyes, so I’d managed to scrape by. But now it would be just Elvia, stripping down to her underwear, right there in the middle of the—gah! *Look away, my eyes!*

I was busy struggling with my evil eye (is that what that means?), Elvia was busily taking off her clothing. And since the tube top covering her chest was basically just underwear already, when that came off—when that came off—nggaahhhh.

All bouncy, and jouncy, and jiggly, and two very soft-looking, well, um... (Technical difficulties... Please stand by...)

“Um, Master...” Myusel said from beside me.

“Y—Yef?”

“Should... Should I change, too...?”

“Wh-Why would you do that?!”

Did I really look that happy?!

Wh-What, my hand? What about my hand? It’s not doing anything. It was definitely not stretching out unconsciously toward Elvia’s chest! It was... her tail! That’s it, I was going to touch that big, poofy tail! Please believe me!

“If—If it’s your wish, Master...”

“I-It’s fine, you don’t have to change! I’ve got my hands full with Elvia here; if you did it, too, my Kurobe Dam might break! Not that I know what that means!”

“Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said, her eyes uncharacteristically cold behind her glasses. “Hasn’t it occurred to you to just *turn around*?”

“Yeah! Great idea! Gosh, silly me! Kanou Shinichi here, looking at the wall!”

Then I turned my back on Elvia.

But...

“Hey, Minori-sama. How’s this work?”

“Oh, the bra? It goes lengthwise, like—yeah, that’s it.”

“Y-Yikes, it kinda tickles...”

“Just live with it.”

.....

My brain conjured up achingly realistic scenes of a beast girl and a woman soldier sharing a yuri moment. Wait—why was Minori-san in her underwear in my imagination? And why did I feel guilty, like I was peeping into the girls' changing room...?

"Urgh..."

Turning my back only invited the most depraved fantasies! My fantasies...!

Curse my bounteous imagination! Did they want me to technobreak and die?!

"Master, are you okay?"

"I'm okay... I think!" I answered. I picked a rivet on the wall and stared at it as hard as I could.

So it was a little hectic for a while there. Happily, though, we all got clean bills of health, and with Myusel and Elvia in tow I was finally able to officially come home to Japan.

Minori-san had changed into civilian clothing; she was going to continue to act as my bodyguard. Paperwork had been filed with the JSDF beforehand, and they'd furnished us with a vehicle—a small van that was waiting on the road just outside the Sea of Trees. Minori-san would be our driver.

I think a personal vehicle was the right choice. Things being what they were, Myusel and Elvia seemed more likely to attract attention on the train. I could just imagine the things that might go wrong trying to help them take public transport.

"This is all our luggage, right?" Minori-san said, surveying the pile of bags and wooden boxes in the back of the van.

As I said, she was in civilian clothes now, not the uniform I was so used to. Her outer layer was a sort of anorak—a parka-like thing in military green—but under that she was wearing a lavender shirt with white English lettering, a pair of hotpants, black stockings, and a pair of boots. Talk about casual.

To be totally honest, she looked wicked cute. Usually, the uniform made her look sort of grown-up by default (and remember, she *was* older

than me), but the way she looked now, you could have mistaken her for a high-schooler.

But anyway...

“So this is the box with the magic stone in it, right?”

“Yes it is the one Her Majesty gave to me,” Myusel said.

Now that we were outside the Sea of Trees, we were apparently beyond the zone of usable magic; the interpreter rings weren’t working very well. Myusel decided to resort to her stumbling but usable Japanese. Elvia knew a smattering of Japanese vocabulary, but she didn’t have Myusel’s mastery of grammar, and could only manage to speak in small bursts.

“Something wrong...?” Myusel asked.

“No, I was just thinking it’s awfully light for a box that’s supposed to have a rock in it,” Minori-san said, pointing. “Mind if I open it?”

“The court mages, they said to not open unless at the time that I need to use it,” Myusel said.

The stone was essentially like a magical battery: open it up and it would start to release energy, however slowly. I was told that for that reason, the stone had been enclosed in a glass case, as well.

“Hrm, well, okay,” Minori-san said, giving the box a dubious smack.

“Heek!”

“Huh...?” Minori-san said, looking around and blinking. “Myusel? Did you say something?”

“...Eh? Noh...”

“Elvia?”

Elvia made a sort of curious noise in response.

“I guess not,” Minori-san said.

Elvia, for one, had gone around to the front of the van and was examining it with interest. It was the first time she’d ever seen anything like it—it looked awfully different from the army’s LAV—and she was probably eager to sketch it. From that position, we wouldn’t have heard her muttering to herself, and if she’d said anything loud enough for us to hear, Myusel would have certainly noticed it.

“And it wasn’t you, was it, Shinichi-kun? I was sure I heard someone...”

“Maybe you’d hear better if you had a pair of cat ears, Minori-san...”

“Dream on!”

Dumb conversation notwithstanding, we ushered Myusel and Elvia into the van. Minori-san hopped in the driver's seat, and I rode shotgun.

Minori-san fired the engine and made sure the van was running smoothly; meanwhile, two men in black suits appeared seemingly out of nowhere and looked in the window. "Everything ready?"

"Yes, sir," Minori-san said with a salute. "No problems." I guess these guys were from the JSDF, too.

"Get going, then," the man said. "We'll tail you for safety." He pointed to a black van parked about ten meters away. It was bigger than our vehicle, with smoked glass windows. Pretty intimidating stuff.

"Hold on. I didn't hear anything about this," Minori-san said with a frown.

"Orders came down from Ichigaya just a little while ago," the man said expressionlessly.

"Why so sudden? Our only business this time is to take Kanou Shinichi to visit his fam—"

"Orders are orders," the man interrupted. "The reasons are above our pay grade."

Yuck. I didn't like this one bit. Like Matoba-san said, it didn't look like they were out to murder me immediately (otherwise, they could have just shot or stabbed me without the small talk), but that didn't make it a whole lot easier to just trust that they really were here for my protection.

"Sergeant Koganuma Minori. These are your written orders. Acknowledge receipt, please." One of the men passed her a piece of paper.

...Wait, what? I thought Minori-san was a Private First-Class.

"...Orders received," Minori-san said, but she didn't look happy about it.

"Good," the man said, and then he and the other guy went to their van.

"Minori, sama," Myusel said with obvious concern in her voice, "these people, they were friends of ours?"

"You're just full of questions I can't answer, aren't you?" Minori-san said with a bitter smile.

Minori-san's alarm at the conversation with the men in suits wasn't lost on Myusel. And considering how much Japanese she could understand...

"I wouldn't call them friends just yet," Minori-san said. "But I wouldn't call them enemies, either. To be honest with you, I don't know what kind of take the higher-ups have on Shinichi's little trip home. It happened so fast,

they probably haven't had time to call their meetings and decide what to do, but that makes it all the more likely that someone lower down the totem pole will take matters into their own hands..."

Myusel looked a little confused. "I do not quite understand, but you think there may be trubull, yes?"

"Let's say I'm feeling cautious," Minori-san said with a nod.

Then I realized Myusel and Elvia were nodding at each other in the back seat. A second later...

"Uh, Myusel?"

She was mumbling something, and then she was leaning out the open window of our van. She pulled a bottle out of her bag and flung it away. It smashed on the ground, but there was nothing inside.

Wait. Was that—?

"*.....Tifu murottsu.*"

Myusel spoke so softly and calmly that at first, it didn't even register with me that she was intoning offensive magic. A second later, though, there was a rush of wind, so strong I could feel the lift. The van the two men in suits were riding in went *wumph* and tilted crazily. It looked like the front tires had come clean off.

"Now, this is our chance," Myusel said to me and Minori-san. The two of us were just watching, flabbergasted.

No, no, no—no?!

Huh? What?

Had Myusel just attacked a JSDF vehicle?!

"But why...?!" I wailed.

"I am your bodee-guard, Master," Myusel said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "It is not right that dangerous people are following you. Carriages, they do not move if you break the wheels. So I have broken their wheels."

Minori-san and I looked at each other.

"Shinichi-kun," she said, leaning in so she could whisper to me.

Minori-san, your, uh, face is very close to mine. Your breathing, I can feel your—ahhhh.

No, no, not the time!

"I just realized," she said, "there's something I never told you. Something about that time you were captured by Bahairam."

"Yes?"

Why was she bringing this up now?

"Myusel grabbed my pistol and threatened Elvia into taking us to Bahairam. I had a thought then—that maybe Myusel gets tunnel vision when it comes to you. She really might do anything for you. She's got a touch of yandere in her. Lucky you, huh?"

"Is this where you expect me to be all, '*Yaay! Shinichi loves yanderes!*'?"

"I'm just saying, if she starts stirring an empty stewpot, watch out."

Then Minori-san gunned the engine and got us out of there.

"Hey!" It took the men in black a moment to comprehend what had happened to them, but when they figured out their ride wasn't going anywhere, they jumped out and started shouting at us. By that time, though, our little van had gotten up some speed, and they weren't going to catch us on foot.

"Can we really do that?" I asked, looking out the back window at the swiftly shrinking figures of the two men. "They're JSDF just like you, aren't they, Minori-san?"

"They're not with the people who give *me* orders on the org chart. They must be suits from the Ministry's information or intelligence divisions. I haven't heard anything from my superiors, so I don't have to listen to them."

She sounded awfully confident about that.

I wasn't sure that was really allowed—but then again, how many movies had I seen where someone from another department tries to horn in on an investigation or something, and the commander on the ground goes, "I don't care if you're military, this isn't your turf?"

"Is this what they mean when they talk about the dangers of bureaucratic infighting?" I asked.

"I guess you could say that," Minori-san said. She had a surprisingly happy smile on her face as she hit the gas and picked up speed.

To get from Yamanashi Prefecture, where Mt. Fuji and the Sea of Trees are, to Tokyo, takes about two and a half hours by car.

That, of course, is assuming you don't get caught in a traffic jam, but when you add in rest stops and whatever else, it's really closer to three

hours. And for people who aren't used to traveling, that's a surprisingly long time.

Especially when you've just come back from an alternate world to Japan—a journey you couldn't normally make in three days or three months, let alone three hours—in about thirty minutes. And thus I found I had completely forgotten the reality of those three hours to Tokyo. Add to that my years as a shut-in, during which I'd never taken a long car trip...

"Urrrghhh..."

We were at a service area somewhere along the route. I'd begged Minori-san to pull over and had stumbled out of the car, breathing hard.

I didn't feel good. I thought I was going to be sick.

When I glanced back, I could see Myusel and Elvia slumped against either side of the van, neither of them looking much better than I felt. Our driver, Minori-san, was the only one who looked like she was having a good time.

"That's what you get for playing with your phone and trying to read manga in a moving vehicle," she chirped.

"You're right... I see that now," I said, leaning on the hood of the van for support.

Myusel and Elvia had started out looking out the window—they were eager for their first glimpse of "Ja-pan"—but it turned out that the scenery in nature-rich Yamanashi, especially out here on the highway, wasn't that different from anything in Eldant. So they'd eventually turned to the books and portable games I'd brought along... and got carsick.

"Important question," Minori-san said. "Myusel, Elvia. We've still got more than an hour until we get to Tokyo. Either of you need the bathroom?"

"Er... I'll u-use the bath room."

"Bath room? Bathroom! I go!"

They both looked a little desperate.

Minori-san, though, said, "I guess neither of you probably knows how to use the toilets around here... But I bet you won't be willing to leave Shinichi-kun alone, either. I'll take each of you to the bathroom one at a time, and the other one can stay here with Shinichi-kun. Okay?"

Myusel gave Elvia a quick-and-dirty translation of what Minori-san had said, and the beast girl nodded vigorously. It looked like she was just about at her limit.

“Okay, Elvia, come with me. The girls’ bathrooms are always crowded...”

Then Minori-san led Elvia off in the direction of the women’s toilet.

Myusel and I didn’t have much choice—we worked our way over to a line of vending machines we could see near the van. I spotted a convenience store, but that would only take us even farther from the toilets. Eventually, Myusel would want her turn to go.

“Shinichi-sama?”

“Oh, these are vending machines,” I said, pointing to one that sold a range of beverages. I dug in my pocket and found some small change that had gone unused for a very long time. It hadn’t done me any good in a country that had never heard of Japanese yen. Now I slid a few of the coins into the machine.

“I’ll bet we’re both thirsty. How about a drink?”

“Yes? Yes, but—”

Suddenly, Myusel looked at the ground apologetically.

“What’s up?”

“I did not have my tea supplies.”

“Huh? Oh—no, no,” I said quickly.

Myusel thought I was asking her to make tea for me, like I would do back at the mansion. I wondered what kind of overbearing, selfish lord would turn to his maid after they arrived in a strange land and immediately say, “Make me some tea!” But by Eldant standards I *was* sort of a lord, and my maid had to be ready.

“This thing is going to make tea for us,” I said, pointing at the vending machine.

Myusel looked thoroughly perplexed.

“Just watch,” I said, and then I picked one of the tea options at random and pressed the button.

Myusel jumped a little when a paper cup came dropping from the machine. But the machine didn’t care; it just went ahead and filled the cup with tea. When it was finished, a light went on and the machine announced, “Please take your drink.”

“See?” I said, taking the cup. “Here.” I held it out to Myusel.

“.....Tea? Is it... tea?”

“Yeah. Try it and see,” I said.

Myusel took the cup, looking very concerned, and brought it to her lips. But then her face lit up and she exclaimed, “It *is* tea!”

“Sure is,” I said with a bit of a grin.

Myusel took another sip or two, her face shining. “It is delicious tea!”

“Eh, it’s vending-machine tea. But I hear they’ve really started to get it down lately.”

“So there is a mayde...?” Myusel was trying to peek into the dispenser.

“No! No, there’s no maid,” I said, shaking my head.

But... hang on. *A maid inside.* A person. A beautiful girl...

There were already plenty of series in which various objects were anthropomorphized into pretty girls, but as far as I knew, none of them featured vending machines turned into girls. Aw, yeah! There were the ones that dispensed paper cups, the ones that sold cans, the ones that sold things in packets, the machines vending cup ramen. Apparently, they even had vending machines that sold bread and Calorie M**e bars now. And then there was the elusive thousand-yen vending machine!

This was my chance to get in on the ground floor of something big. I could see it now: the manga, the anime, the game(s)—and the royalties.....!

Gotta catch all the vending machines!

...The thoughts I was thinking didn’t even merit the dignity of being called ridiculous. Anyway, I bought a cup of coffee, and Myusel and I went back to the van.

Just then, though, I thought I felt the vehicle quake a little.

“Myusel?”

“Yes?”

I glanced at her, but she wasn’t touching the van. And Minori-san and Elvia still weren’t back from the bathroom. And of course, there was no one ins—

“Myusel, get back,” I said, gesturing at her.

Okay, so she was supposed to be my bodyguard, but I really felt silly constantly having to be protected by a girl. Given that Myusel didn’t really know how anything worked here in Japan, I had to take command sometimes or things would get out of control.

“And, uh, lend me one of your sprite bottles, or a magic stone or something.”

“Oh, yes, sir,” Myusel said, taking a deep-green gem—it almost looked like an emerald—that I assumed was a magic stone and pressing it into my hand. It had been made into a necklace.

It was sort of warm. A little like... a person?

Wait... Myusel had been wearing this under her clothes... meaning that the warmth I was feeling was from her beautiful valley, from the cleft in her—ahhhhhhh.

No! This wasn’t the time to be getting all excited!

This rock full of magical energy would allow me to get off at least one good magic spell. If I used Tifu Murottsu like Myusel had taught me, I might stand a chance of defending myself.

“Shinichi-sama...”

I didn’t answer. Myusel had taken out one of the sprite bottles—my look must have made her wary.

Incidentally, after attacking the JSDF van earlier, she reported that although she could draw magic from the stone, in the magical vacuum that was Japan, the energy depleted awfully quickly. It would be okay for things that were right next to her—protecting herself personally, or even just using the magic ring—but ranged attacks like Tifu Murottsu were not likely to go very far.

The most effective thing would be to smash open the sprite bottle, then draw on the stone to use a spell while the environment was still magic-rich. This was apparently what they did when fighting dragons or when around other creatures or phenomena that absorb magical energy: opened large numbers of sprite bottles all at once just before using any magic.

“Could it be from back here? From the luggage?” I said, going around and peering in the back of the van.

There was no one there, of course. And yet the van had definitely shaken.

What on earth...?

I opened the rear hatch. It looked exactly like it had when we’d set out: three bags... and the boxes of magical stones and sprite bottles Petralka had given us.

I caught my breath. One of the boxes shook. *Thump.*

That was it! Was there something inside?!

I thought back on my conversation with Matoba-san:

“Is this... a medical inspection?”

"Well, we did just come back from another world."

It was true: we had been in another world just a few hours before. A world full of sprites, dragons, and other things that you only ever saw in manga, anime, games, and light novels around here. It would be all too easy to bring some unknown, invisible disease back with us, and that's why the medical inspection was necessary.

But now that I thought about it... I had read on the net somewhere about how foreign organisms could move around by riding along on ships or planes, and end up totally destroying an ecosystem. It didn't matter if they were brought in completely by accident; an organism that had never existed in a certain place before could ravage that environment in too many ways to count.

Was that what we had done?

For that matter—what was *in* that box?!

I recited an incantation so that I could use Tifu Murottsu at any moment, cutting off just before I completed the spell. The lid looked like it was ready to pop right off the box.

And then it did.

Bam! The lid went flying, hitting the ceiling of the van as if propelled by an explosion before dropping back to the floor. Finally, something emerged...

"...Huh?"

"...Wha?"

Myusel and I said in unison.

But then Myusel said, quietly: "*Itosejamu*?"

Itosejamu. It was an Eldant word I was very familiar with.

It meant *Majesty*.

And that could only mean...

"Petralka?!"

She was facing down, so I couldn't see her immediately, but it had to be her. And then she popped up out of the box, arms thrust up as if to say "*Banzai!*": our silver-haired, tsundere, loli (oops, that's all off the record, okay?) Majesty, Empress Petralka an Eldant III.

"But... But why? How?" I let my magic spell go and stared at Petralka.

What was she doing here? Could this be the doll?

But without Lauron, that would be pointless, so—

My head whirled with the possibilities.

"...Urgh," she said, still not looking up.

"Urgh?" I echoed.

Finally, she looked at me.

"I beel terribbbleee..."

And then Petralka collapsed.

"We cannot be more clear."

Once I had gotten Petralka calmed down a little and Minori-san had gotten everyone to the toilet and back, we convened in the van to hear Petralka's story.

"If anything were to happen to you without our knowledge, Shinichi, it would be most troublesome!"

We had decided to open one of the sprite bottles inside the closed vehicle so that we could use the interpreter rings to have a little conversation about exactly what was happening.

"But why would you..."

"Myusel and Elvia you had with you, and Minori as well, but with them alone we remained uneasy," Petralka said.

"Yeah, but..." I didn't feel like Petralka was going to add a lot to our firepower if it came to that.

Anyway, what was an imperial majesty even doing in a place like this?!

"What are you going to do about your, you know—*empire*?"

"Lauron has been doing quite well, has she not?" She sounded so... nonchalant.

"Oh, geez," I groaned, picturing Lauron having to fill in for Petralka. I hoped the empress had at least alerted Garius and Zahar, and hadn't left Lauron with the pressure of trying to deceive her two closest advisors.

Poor girl...

"We have left her with a letter in our own hand, with instructions to give it to Garius or Zahar, should they discover us. Lauron will not be blamed."

"Maybe, but she takes everything so seriously..."

Just the fact that the empress herself had snuck out of the castle without a word to anyone was a huge deal. If people found out that Lauron had known about it, and had kept the whole thing secret... well, it didn't matter

if she had the empress's personal permission. I had the feeling she would be lucky to escape alive.

"And anyway, is it not the business of an empress to gain firsthand knowledge of those nations with which her own country has diplomacy?" Petralka clapped her hands.

I fixed her with a stare. "You just thought that up now, didn't you?"

"W-Watch your tongue!"

Bingo.

Anyway...

"This is bad, for sure. But what do we do...?" Minori-san said, crossing her arms. "We could get in touch with Ichigaya and request a unit to see Her Majesty safely back to the wormhole... Hrm, probably not a good idea."

"Yeah, not my first choice..."

By the way, "Ichigaya" was basically a way of referring to the Ministry of Defense. (It's the part of Tokyo where the building is.) But Ichigaya *had* sent us some people—specifically, the two men in black suits—and we had attacked them with magic.

And there was one other little concern...

"We shall not go back!" Petralka said, crossing her own arms.

"But Your Majesty," Minori-san said, "even if we didn't mind having you here—"

"We shall not go back until we have seen with our own eyes your 'holy land,' Akihabara!" Petralka insisted.

"So that's what you wanted..." I said.

"Er, it is—ahem—*one* of the things." Petralka couldn't quite look me in the eye.

I guess that was very Petralka-esque, but... argh.

I was starting to think the whole "doll" project had been a big mistake. The presence of a useful body double seemed to have lightened the load of a young woman who had been weighed down by her royal responsibilities. But it hadn't worked out quite the way I'd envisioned—her demands and self-indulgence seemed to have grown out of proportion to how much work the doll could do.

"All right," Minori-san said with a sigh. "Whatever we end up doing, we aren't going to fix anything sitting here. First we'll focus on our original objective, visiting Shinichi-kun's parents. Then we can decide whether to

head straight back to Yamanashi, get in touch with my superiors, or what. I guess that would be the right thing to do."

"You think...?"

Frankly, I felt like I was in over my head. I couldn't object to anything Minori-san said, and I didn't have any better ideas, anyway.

Minori-san started the van. "Let's go, then," she said. "Quickly."

After that, things went smoothly—no traffic, no ambushes—and a little over an hour later, we arrived at my house in Tokyo.

"So this is your mansion, Shinichi?" Petralka asked, observing my house from the van. "It is decidedly small."

"Considering the housing situation in Japan..." I said with a thin smile. "But I guess it doesn't look like much compared to Eldant Castle."

My family lived in a free-standing house on the fringes of a residential district. Sitting on just over 165 square meters of land, it was a 5LDK (that is, five rooms plus a living area, dining room, and kitchen) with a garage. It was a little on the large side for a family of four, I'll admit, but my dad had had it built in a fit of excitement when he got something of a windfall—back when one of his novels got turned into an anime. So it wasn't like our family was especially rich or anything.

My dad was fond of saying that light-novel authors were basically nothing but gamblers, and it sounds like the huge swings in our family's income from year to year made asset management and life planning a real pain.

Anyway...

"I'm going to open the door," Minori-san warned us. Then she pressed a button, and the van's automatic door slid open.

"Shinichi, I must ask—*ereeu era ruoi tsuneriipu*?"

And Petralka, who had been talking normally until that moment, was suddenly speaking a foreign language. Er, of course, what had actually happened was that the interpreter rings had stopped working. She had been speaking in Eldant all along.

It only took Petralka a second to notice the shift, after which she coughed discreetly and said, "Ahem. Shinichi, your par-entz, where shall they be?"

Obviously, she could have used the magic stone to keep speaking in Eldant, but our supply of backup magical energy was hardly limitless. We had decided, when we were around people who didn't have rings anyway, to do our very best to speak only in one language or the other.

"My dad might still be in the hospital," I said, "but at this time of day, my mom... I'm not sure."

It was 3:30 in the afternoon, kind of a weird time: I suspected my younger sister Shizuki wouldn't be back from school yet, and a lot of times my mom went shopping about now.

In other words, it was entirely possible the house was empty.

"Minori-san, I've been meaning to ask," I said. "What's my status over here? Am I considered missing?"

"Probably, I guess," Minori-san said with a nod. "I don't know the details, either, but I suspect they're just treating you as a missing person."

"Hmm... And then I just show up back at home all of a sudden? Might cause a commotion."

Especially if my mom and sister came back to discover their supposedly missing family member just hanging around the house. Would they be angry? Annoyed? I just couldn't say.

"Well, I guess we aren't going to look any *less* suspicious just sitting outside the house here," I said. "Let's go in."

I pulled a key out of my pocket. Sure, it dated from before I'd gone to the other world, but I doubted they had changed the locks.

I opened the exterior gate, and we walked up to the front door. I put the key in the lock and turned it... *click*.

Ooh. It opened. It looked like I was right about the locks.

"Uh... I'm home," I said politely, but quietly, feeling very strange as I entered the house.

I almost said "Pardon me" instead—a sign, I guess, that I had started to think of the mansion I shared with Myusel and the others as my real house. To be honest, as familiar as this place ought to have been, I didn't quite feel, well, at home here.

Depending how long it took me to find out what was going on with my dad, maybe my stay here would be short anyway.

I took my shoes off and started farther into the house. But then...

"Hm?"

I heard a sound from down the hallway.

“Hmm...”

The room down that way was my dad’s office. I could hear a voice of some kind emanating from it. A girl’s voice, but not Shizuki’s. And... was that background music?

What the heck...?

I frowned and started walking that way. When I reached the door to my father’s office, I could hear the voice more clearly.

After a moment, I knew I had been right: the sound was coming from some kind of video game. So many of them had voice acting these days.

But... it couldn’t be.

“Dad?”

He didn’t keep the door locked, so I pushed it open and peeked inside.

At that very moment—

“Argh! It sank! That was my trump card!”

The walls to either side were lined with shelves overflowing with books, figures, model weapons, and air guns. In the middle of it all, I could see a middle-aged man, his back to me, pounding his desk like a child having a tantrum.

“Dammit, after all the time I spent on this—”

Before I knew what was happening, I exclaimed, “What the heck are you *doing*?!”

Even as absorbed in his game as he was, he couldn’t miss this, and the man—that is to say, my father, Kanou Shougo, alias Kanno Shougo—twitched and turned around.

A look of shock came over his face. “It’s... It’s you...!”

For the record, my dad had a sort of square-ish face and wore glasses; a pretty standard “oldish guy” look. I’d heard that at his publisher’s parties he had a habit of wearing sunglasses, which in combination with his suit made him look like a yakuza gangster. But here around the house, he stuck to sweatshirts, which made him look like the classic hopeless otaku.

Like father, like son, eh?

But now—

“You idiot!” he said, getting out of his chair. “What are you doing here?!”

“That’s my line!” I said.

Gee, Dad! Sorry I came rushing all the way from another dimension *when I heard you were in the hospital—just to find you playing games in*

your office!

"Aren't you supposed to be in India on some journey of self-discovery?!"

"Self-discoverwhat?!"

"You left us a note!"

All I could do was groan. This had Matoba-san's fingerprints all over it.

A journey of self-discovery in India, though? How slapdash could you get? Why India, anyway? Because I could potentially be there for all eternity? Because I would train in the mountains until the spirit of Devadatta resided in me?

And then there was another problem: my parents had actually *bought* all this?

"I just assumed you'd gone off to train, just like Rainbow Man," my dad said.

"That anime's practically ancient! Why would I pick *that* one to imitate?"

I had to admit, the fact that we were thinking of exactly the same thing really gave me a sense of the bond between parent and child.

And then...

"Ahum, Shinichi, sama?"

Hesitantly peering into my father's office from behind me was Myusel.

She blinked, looking around the room—and then, at last, her eyes met my dad's.

He was silent.

She was silent.

They just stared at each other.

Until finally...

"IS THAT ***REALLY*** A MAID?!"

Gee, that sounded familiar somehow...

More than shocked, more than surprised, my dad sounded... *happy* as he pumped his fist in the air.

I sensed that connection again, but this time, it felt more like a curse.

About half an hour later, we were sitting in the living room, and I was giving my dad the third degree—er, I mean, we were having a little chat.

“Yeah, I was in the hospital. For real.” He was slouched on the sofa, not seeming the least bit concerned or remorseful. “They rushed me in for a, whaddayacallit, a ureteral calculus. You know about those? They hurt, like, on a scale of one to ten, these are an eleven!”

“I guess I’ve heard of them,” I said evasively.

I stared at my dad, who seemed to be practically enjoying himself chatting about these ureteral whatevers.

According to him, incidentally, this sort of thing happened a lot to writers. He said he’d heard about one author who had way too much to drink at a publisher’s party, fell over, hurt his face—blood everywhere—and was taken to the hospital by ambulance. He figured, *What the hell*, and had begged his friend (also a writer, of course) to take his picture to prove he’d been in an ambulance. The EMT got super upset at the friend, who protested that he’d only been doing what he was asked.

All pretty pathetic, if you ask me. But anyway...

“There’ve been these great advances in surgery though, see? Depending on how big the stone is, they can get rid of it without even opening you up—not a scalpel in sight! They slam it with these, like, shockwaves that turn it to dust.”

“What, really?”

“You know it started as military technology for finding subs underwater?”

“No kidding? That’s *bad-ass*!”

“Isn’t it?!” My dad leaned forward. “You, my son, may call me the man who got hit with the shockwave weapon and lived to tell about it.”

“I’m not calling you anything. You would’ve gotten smashed to pieces,” I said with a sigh. “But look, the point is, it was no big deal, right?”

“Aw, yeah, no biggie,” he said nonchalantly. “I was only in the hospital for about three days. I decided that since I was there, I might as well get some tests done, and they didn’t like the numbers they saw. Doc told me to rest for a while, so I got my editor to put my stuff on hiatus. Told him it was for my health.”

“Uh-huh,” I groaned.

In other words, this wasn’t a complete false alarm, but he basically figured he could get some time off by pretending things were a lot worse than they were. True, though, I did get the impression that my dad was a real workaholic who could probably do with a nice, long break.

“Well, what was I supposed to make of what they put on the net?”

“Hm? Oh, that... Hey, you’re one to talk!” my dad said, jabbing me in the face almost audibly. “Disappearing off to India like that on some journey or whatever!”

“Argh! That was just—” But before I could finish, I felt someone tug on my sleeve. I looked over to see Minori-san pointedly shaking her head. I guess I was supposed to keep the secrets secret, even from my family. “...uh, something I feel bad about,” I concluded.

“Well, somebody transfers money into your bank account periodically, so we figured you were at least alive and maybe even had a job somewhere. Our kids always have been good at pulling it out in the eleventh hour.”

“My bank account? Money? Ahh...” That was when I remembered that as Amutech’s GM, I *was* theoretically drawing a salary.

“Just explain something to me,” my dad said, staring at me from behind his glasses. Or more precisely, staring at me... and Myusel, and Petralka, and Elvia, and Minori-san. “You disappear off the face of the Earth, and then all of a sudden you show up with four young women. One of them a maid, one a little-sister type, one a *genki* girl, and one an older-sister type, no less. What is this, a harem?! It’s a harem! Who do you think you are, the MC of some hack light novel?!”

“Look who’s talking!” I said. This guy *wrote* half the hack light novels around.

Beside me, the girls were having a whispered conversation.

“*Sishi shi esu resafu fuo Shinichi*,” Petralka ventured. *So this is Shinichi’s father.*

“*Ti shi hikasu...*” Myusel said. *Seems like it.*

Petralka: “*Diidoni chi shi reu ekira. Itsuraisebuse egunaatsu chiibusu dona tokadonokku are ekira.” I see, father and son are much alike. They are both equally odd.*

Elvia: “*Reu.*” *Yep.*

Um... I’m sitting right here. Remember I can understand you, okay, girls?

Finding out I was *that* much like my dad was... well...

But before I could come up with exactly what it was, someone called out, “I’m home,” as they came in the back door. A second later, a middle-aged woman carrying a shopping bag appeared in the living room where we were all sitting.

It was Kanou Sakiko. My mom.

"Shougo-san, I got you the *Rental☆Madoka* Ichiban **ji you wanted. It was the last one they—"

That was as far as she got before she stopped talking.

For what it's worth, my mom's a little on the short side, and her outfits skew stylish, but otherwise she's a pretty typical "auntie." She prides herself on looking, in her own words, about ten years younger than she is, but speaking as her son I can't say it's something that matters a lot to me.

There was a rustle of plastic as the shopping bag dropped the ground.

"Oh, uh, m-mom, I'm h—"

I heard a sharp exhalation, and the next thing I knew, I had been thrown upside down on the floor.

As another point of reference, my mom may have been an ero-game designer, but she took martial arts to avoid being too sedentary, and she could toss you around with techniques more suited to a street punk than a housewife. Family lore has it that when my mom and dad were dating, they were accosted by a trio of shady characters, whom my mom happily beat to within an inch of their lives. This, evidently, was what inspired my dad to marry her: "I thought, *This is someone I can live with!*"

I mean... wouldn't you normally go running the other way?

But anyway, never mind.

"Uh, hey, mom—I mean, mother dearest?"

"Shougo-san, give me some rope—no, some chains!"

"On it!"

Argh, hang on, you two!

Geez, is that how you treat a long(?)-lost son when he comes home? Like a terrorist you have to subdue? Where's the love?!

"Just let me talk—!"

"No talk! Shut your mouth!" my mom said, grinding my face into the floor. "You can try to use your Mental Pollution, but it won't work!"

"Why would I try that?!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Minori-san watching in exasperation. Myusel, Elvia, and Petralka had all jumped up in astonishment, never expecting that I would suddenly be attacked by my own mother.

"I'll never believe you're the real Shinichi! The real Shinichi is a spineless coward who disappeared into his room just because he got shot

down by his childhood friend Shouko-chan, and here *you* are with four separate women!”

“‘Spineless coward’? Screw you! You finally see your long-lost son, and the first thing you do is pour salt in his most traumatic wound? Some mother! Hey—how do you even know about that?!”

“You must be an alien, or a fairy, or at the very least some monster from another world—some unnatural fiend using Shinichi’s face! Show your true self!” My mother looked downright triumphant.

Wait—you think someone might be an alien, fairy, or otherworldly monster, and the first thing you do is throw them?! There was something wrong with her!

“I’m not any of those things! I’m telling you, I’m Kanou Shinichi!”

“That’s just what an imposter *would* say!” With what felt like an audible whooshing sound, my mother produced a piece of paper seemingly out of nowhere. She held it out, unfolding it, and I saw that it was a poster. “If you can step on this, I’ll believe you’re really Shinichi!”

“B-But that’s an *Absolute Madoka-tan* movie poster!”

Featured proudly on the poster was Madoka, the girl who had worked at a company so brutal that her eyes were finally opened to the worst realities of corporate life, and she had resolved to bring down all the most villainous companies of the world, climbed to the top of the political ladder, and become the magical girl Prime Minister—known as “Absolute Madoka”!

I’d heard they did a feature film after the TV series ended, but...!

“I... I can’t step on that!” I wailed, staring at the poster my mother had thrust down at my feet.

It was impossible. To step on Madoka-tan’s angelic face—the “Absolute Prime Minister” version smiling up at me from the red carpet, no less—I simply couldn’t do it!

“Huh,” my mom said, frowning as she stood there watching me agonize. “So it *is* you.”

“Geez, don’t sound too excited...”

She’d sounded happier when she thought some alien or [...] had shown up than when she found out it was her own missing son!

I mean... I guess I could understand. I was under no illusions about who my parents were. They could have, for example, tried cutting off my internet to get me out of my room, but instead they busted through the door with a chainsaw.

“Shougo-san, it looks like he’s really our son.”

“Seems that way,” my dad agreed with a nod.

And *then*...

“I’m home,” said yet another person.

Ah. That would have to be...

“Huh? Do we have guests?”

She must have seen the shoes in the entranceway.

Even as she spoke, my little sister Shizuki came into the living room.

She still had the same plain-ish, shoulder-length haircut, tied with a ribbon—as close as she came to a really distinctive piece of clothing—and she still had the same eyes, big but sharp, like a cat’s. People told me all the time that the family resemblance between us was obvious, but one thing I definitely did not have was her ability to intimidate someone just by staring at them.

Well, maybe Shizuki was as surprised as I was to be told we were similar. And it’s worth remembering that she was, in a way, the black sheep of the family—which in our case meant she was the one person otakuism hadn’t touched at all.

Now Shizuki stood frozen in the doorway. Five seconds went by, then ten.

Finally there was a *thump* as she dropped her school bag, much the way our mom had dropped her shopping.

Then, however, Shizuki’s gaze went from me to Minori-san, from Minori-san to Myusel, and then to Petralka and Elvia.

“Get a load of this, Shizuki. Shinichi is back with a whole bushel of brides,” my dad said with—was that a note of pride?

Um, excuse me! I think you’re inviting all sorts of misunderstandings!

Shizuki’s eyes worked their way back to me. Then she walked over to me at a brisk clip, looked up at me—I was still just a little bit taller than she was—and said:

“Ex*cuse* me, big brother?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah?”

Shizuki hadn’t called me “*onii-san*,” big brother, in years—in fact, maybe ever, and it put me on my guard. When she was a little kid, she had always called me “*onii-chan*,” Big Bro; and after she got to middle school it was “*aniki*,” just plain old “older brother.” And after I’d become a shut-in, she’d stopped calling me anything at all.

Now she said...

“Drop dead!!”

Also, she launched a powerful kick into my stomach.

“Hrgh?!” I exclaimed, doubling over.

Shizuki, now looking down at me, spat, “I take back ever worrying about you!”

“Shinichi-sama?!” Myusel said, she and Elvia jumping up from the sofa, but Minori-san held up a hand to stop them. Thankfully. Elvia didn’t even know about Shizuki—Myusel had at least seen her picture—and my little sister could all too easily have ended up attacked by a beast girl.

Shizuki left the room without another word.

What was it she had just said? She took back worrying about me? Did that mean... Did that mean she had actually *been* worried about me?

Had *Shizuki* been worried about *me*?

Honestly, now that I thought about it, her reaction was a lot more natural than either of my parents’. I guess she was, after all, the only non-otaku in the Kanou household, our one bastion of common sense.

“Hrrgh... Hrmm...?”

For the moment, though, sinking to my knees on the living room floor as I watched my little sister go, all I really felt was confusion.

And that was it.

I had to go over with my parents, again, the story of why I had gone missing for more than a year, and why I had suddenly come back with all these girls from “abroad.”

“To tell you the truth...” I began. My father had called my sister back into the room, so although she stood with her arms crossed and looking hugely angry, Shizuki was there. “A bio-weapon they were developing in America leaked out and infected me, giving me strange new powers and turning me into a mutant soldier, a living weapon that every country in the world wants to get their hands on...”

“Ah-ha, I knew it!”

“I kept thinking that’s what must have happened!”

My parents were both nodding along enthusiastically.

“What do you mean, you *knew* it?”

“Hel*lo*? It’s practically a cliché!” my dad said. My mother nodded in agreement.

I had come up with this nonsense as a test, to see how readily my parents would buy into what I said. The answer was: very readily. They didn’t question it for a second. Honestly, I thought they were a little *too*

credulous. Although, to be fair, that was exactly what I had been counting on.

Only one person objected.

“That’s impossible! Be serious!”

It was Shizuki, who pounded the wall and shouted.

Hmm. I knew she wouldn’t be as easy as my parents. As the only non-otaku in the family, to her, clichés were something to be avoided, not embraced.

“Okay, the real truth,” I said, clearing my throat... and then I went into the story Minori-san and I had concocted ahead of time.

Here’s how it went: the royal ruler of a country I couldn’t name had taken an interest in otaku culture. Due to a whole lot of very complicated circumstances, though, that country had no diplomatic ties with Japan, and virtually no way to trade with us. Therefore, said country requested a Japanese envoy knowledgeable in otaku matters.

And that was me: Kanou Shinichi.

Because this nameless country turned out to be a major source of minor metals, the Japanese government was eager not to upset the delicate relationship they had with it. For that reason, a JSDF unit was sent on a peacekeeping operation to protect me, a civilian.

That explained Minori-san.

The ruler of this country, thoroughly engaged by otaku culture, had decided to sneak along when I came back to Japan for a visit.

And that explained Petralka.

However, she and I—she being the ruler and me being something of a VIP in that country these days—needed protection, so a couple of servants had been sent with us.

Myusel and Elvia, of course.

That, anyway, was how I explained it to my family.

“So your little friend here is a royal—the princess-sama?” my mom asked, taking in Petralka.

“Well, uh, more or less,” I said evasively. I didn’t point out that she was technically an empress, not a princess.

“I am profoundly sorry for all the worry your family has been caused,” Minori-san said, bowing. She was a knockout combo of JSDF soldier and grown-ass woman: way more convincing than I could ever be when it came to serious conversations like this. “On account of diplomatic and strategic

considerations, however, everything we've discussed here is top-secret information. There was no way we could easily inform you of what was going on. Shinichi-kun has been well taken care of, but he was effectively there under duress. We were concerned about it becoming an international incident and upsetting our relations with the other country if we said anything publicly. The government at the time simply wouldn't allow it."

"I see..."

"But Japan's leadership has changed, as you know, and with it our diplomatic attitude toward the country in question has shifted somewhat. The nation now treats Shinichi-kun as a proper national guest, and we thought this might be an opportunity to come home and try to obtain the assent of his family."

Minori-san didn't miss a beat as she went through the whole convoluted tale.

The "nameless country" was of course the Holy Eldant Empire; Minori-san and I had to make sure our story didn't give away any actual secrets, but it wasn't all lies, either. If you ignored the fact that we didn't say anything about the hyperspace tunnel, or that Eldant was another world entirely, or that it was actually the *Japanese* government that had kidnapped me, then we had actually offered a fairly accurate description of my situation. If it was enough to keep the wool over my family's eyes, then great.

"Hmmm..." My dad crossed his arms and made a thoughtful noise. "So in other words, Shinichi is an otaku evangelist."

"Uh, well, I guess you could say that," I nodded.

"Ah! Fantastic! Superb! *Excellent!*" my dad said, whipping open a fan he'd pulled seemingly from thin air. "You are truly your mother and father's son! Two pure sources make a beautiful concentrate!"

"What are you, some kind of juice drink?"

"We'll have to have celebratory red rice tonight!"

"...Ah, fine, do whatever you want."

I busied myself shooting back at my mom and dad's ridiculous outbursts, but privately I was breathing a sigh of relief that our ruse seemed to have worked. I looked over at Minori-san, who was giving me a discreet thumbs-up.

There was just one tiny little problem. Shizuki was obviously still unhappy.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” she said, and left the room. I could hear her going upstairs, presumably to shut herself in her own room.

“Shinichi’s moth-er and fath-er,” Petralka said suddenly. She had listened silently to our entire conversation until that point. Now she was wearing her “empress” look—formal, self-assured, and unmistakably upper-crust. “Forone thing, our travells are incognito, and all-so spring from our own impulsse. We cann and must not mayk ob-vee-us use of our authority. We are well aware, that our visit is very su-dden, but nonetheless requeste the honor of lodging here for the nyte.”

My mom and dad looked at each other. Petralka’s pronunciation was still a bit hesitant, but her Japanese as such was virtually perfect. Maybe this would lend some credibility to my claim that the royal ruler was a Japanophile.

“But our house only had one spare room... and it was Shinichi’s.”

“No choice, I guess. We’ll make Shinichi pitch a tent in the garden.”

“Now just a second!” I wailed. “Why wouldn’t I just sleep here in the living room?”

“And have an animal like you under the same roof as these beautiful, pure—”

“Hey, I’m your *son*, remember?”

“Then answer me this: Can you honestly say you could lie down and wake up in the same room as these young ladies without getting any untoward ideas about them? That you don’t want to get all *huff-puff* on their shoulders or *lick-lick* at their necks or any other sexual harassment-y stuff like that?! That would cause an international incident, you know—an international! Incident!”

“Erm...” Well, he had me there.

“Anyway, your room is only six mats large, a classic *rokujouma*! We’ve got some spare beds, but getting *four* additional people in there—”

“Oh, I’ll sleep outside,” Minori-san said, raising her hand. “I have to keep an eye on the equipment, so I plan to sleep in the car.”

“Oh?” my mom asked, tilting her head questioningly. “Well, anyway, dear, this is Shinichi we’re talking about. I think it’ll be fine.”

“How d’you figure?”

“There’s no way he has the nerve to jump a young woman. Although I suppose he might *get* jumped himself.”

Silence hung in the air. I was tempted to ask them just what they thought of this son of theirs—but given that Elvia actually had attacked me that one time, I couldn't really say anything.

And so...

"Okay," my dad said. "Far be it from us to begrudge a few days in our house to our son's friends. It's not a big place—I think the royals among us are going to find it a little cramped—but if you don't mind..."

Petralka bowed her head. "Mm. We are moste grate-full." Then she nodded with all the imperial grace and authority she possessed.

"Ooh!"

The exclamation of surprise came from Petralka, her emerald eyes widening as she gazed at the tabletop.

"Is this—mah-gic? *Reveoo ia kunisu taato eresu sou on aira fo repusu...*"

Incidentally, that last part meant "I didn't hear any chanting." In her excitement, Petralka produced a stew of Japanese and Eldant. Understandable enough, I guess.

"Aw, it's no big deal," my dad laughed, a pair of cooking chopsticks in one hand. "At least, I don't think so. That last part didn't make much sense to me."

"Princess Petralka? That's your name, right? Do you not have hot plates in your country?"

"We do not!" Petralka said, sounding oddly important about it. Luckily, people thought it was cute, her getting excited about ordinary household appliances like hot plates, so she could get away with a certain amount of pomposity.

"Heck, they don't have *any* electrical appliances..."

It had been about two hours since I'd given them the broad contours of my story and explained the (fake) identities of Petralka and the others. My parents decided that the way to welcome visitors from another country was with a big meal together.

So we had a yakiniku party, complete with hot plate.

It didn't require too much preparation, and we could use ingredients we already had on hand. The only thing we had to buy was some seasonings

and yakiniku sauce.

"This, I can put it here?"

"Thank you—that's a big help."

In the next room over, the kitchen, Myusel was helping my mom make rice balls. When she'd seen the rice cooker full of fresh rice, she'd said, "I will make *o-ni-gi-ri*."

It seemed like Myusel wasn't very used to being on the receiving side of service like this. She couldn't quite settle down without something to do while the meal was being made. When my mom saw her pacing and fidgeting, she invited Myusel into the kitchen.

You might remember that Myusel and Elvia had been using a hat and a hood, respectively, to hide their ears—well, they still were. Obviously, it looked pretty strange to people raised in Japan, but we just fibbed that in their country, everyone but the royal family had to cover their heads.

"I think that should be plenty," I heard my mom say. "Myusel-san, you sit down. We'll eat soon."

"Yes, *okaa-sama*."

Mmm.

I'd seen Myusel make dinner plenty of times before, but... it was different, somehow, watching her in a stereotypical Japanese kitchen. Somehow, just seeing her there nearly made me embarrassed myself. It was strange. Almost like...

"I almost feel like there's a sweet young bride in the house! And so much sooner than I expected."

Yeah, that was it. That was how it felt. Like I was watching my wife and my mom happily cooking dinner together. It made me blush, but also feel oddly—wait, did she just call my mom *okaa-sama*?!

I swear Myusel isn't actually my—

"*B-ri-de*?" Myusel, whether or not she had any idea how I was feeling, cocked her head curiously.

"Myusel-san," my mom said, "how do you feel about international marriage?"

Myusel's eyes went wide and she put her hands to her mouth and blushed (up to her ears, probably, but I could only assume), but my mom just sighed.

"Then again, with Shinichi for a husband, I guess you couldn't count on much of a future."

“I do not agree!” Myusel said. “Shinichi-sama, he is a most excellent and honorable person! In the country of ours, he is an essential person!”

My mother was silent for a moment. Then she squinted at me. “Shinichi,” she said.

“Yes, ‘*okaa-sama*’?”

“Tell me. Did you use drugs? Or hypnosis?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I want to know how you brainwashed this poor girl into believing—”

“I didn’t brainwash anyone!” I exclaimed, pounding the table.

Geez, didn’t they trust me at all?

...Okay, no, they probably didn’t *trust the former home security guard. Very sorry about that.*

“Good, very good!”

This expression of joy at the meat my father passed around came from (I probably don’t need to tell you) Elvia. Figures a beast girl would like meat.

“Shinichi-sama, very good!”

“Yeah, I heard you,” I said to Elvia, who was brandishing a sausage at me on the end of her fork. Admittedly, it was kind of funny to watch her eat.

“I’d be happy to switch places with you if you’d like, Dad. You’ve been doing all the cooking and none of the eating.”

This kind and considerate offer came, of course, from that paragon of mature womanliness, Minori-san. She even followed up by pouring my dad some beer. She looked like she’d done it a million times.

“Wow...”

“Something the matter?” Minori-san looked at my dad, who was clenching his fist as if transported.

“Shinichi, I think you should take this girl!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The boobs, the glasses—and she’s JSDF, so you know she’s good for a fight. I never imagined the day would come when such a perfect beautiful-girl character would call me ‘Dad’! Shinichi. I’m convinced: I was *born* for this moment!”

“...That’s family resemblance, all right,” Minori-san said with a smirk. Where had I heard *that* before...?

At the very least, she had refrained from exclaiming “Don’t call me a character!” or whatever, showing that she was definitely being polite to my parents.

In any event, we were all chatting and eating and enjoying the yakiniku.

There was just one person who hadn’t said anything the entire meal: Shizuki.

My little sister had sat there in sullen silence the whole time, helping herself mostly to the vegetables. I think our eyes met for about half a second, but Shizuki crimped her whole face into the meanest glare I’d ever seen, and I quickly looked away.

Man. I was on her bad side for sure.

To be fair, her older brother had gone missing for a year, then returned out of the blue with three women from “overseas” and one beautiful *onee-san*. She probably found it even less forgivable than me going home security guard.

“Most in-terr-esting this is, to cook bee-fore one’s own eyes and then to eat,” Petralka said, happily taking a bite of corn. Honestly, I’d been a bit worried about how someone as accustomed to the royal treatment as Petralka was would react to a yakiniku party, but it looked like I shouldn’t have worried. Most of her meals were probably prepared out of sight, and this seemed to be the first time she had ever watched her food cook.

“And while it’s still warm, to eat it thus—we never knew how fine it would taste!”

“Good, very good! Arfh?!” Elvia yelped as she reached to take some meat with her bare hands and brushed the hot plate.

I see, I thought as I watched her. *It’s just like in the comedy routine “The Sanma of Meguro.”*

Petralka was an empress, and her parents had been poisoned, no less. All the food she ate went by two or three different tasters to make sure she didn’t meet the same fate, and by the time it got to her, it was usually cold. That only made this quick, crude dinner all the more surprising and delicious for her.

We may not have planned on Petralka coming with us, but I’d like her to at least have a good time before she goes home, I thought.

Here, in a foreign country where hardly anyone knew who she was, might be her only chance to enjoy not having to be “Her Majesty, the Empress.” I felt bad for what Garius, Zahar, and Lauron must have been

going through, but I also hoped Petralka could enjoy the break from her imperial duties.

"Shinichi's father! Provide more!"

"Ha ha! As you wish, Princess," my dad said pleasantly, piling more meat and vegetables onto Petralka's plate.

Petralka and Elvia watched over the entire merry scene. Minori-san continued to eat with perfect grace. And then, of course, there were the women who had happily made us dinner and were now sitting down to eat themselves, my mom and Myusel.

Shizuki, the only one of us who didn't look like she was having a good time, definitely gnawed at me, but worrying about it wasn't going to get me anywhere. Instead, I reached out with my chopsticks for the nice, salted beef tongue in front of me.

What with this and that, it had gotten pretty late.

"So this is where you sleep, Shinichi," Petralka said, looking around my room with interest. We had decided to go ahead and open a sprite bottle, closing the door and windows to keep the magic in, so we could use the interpreter rings to communicate. "We must say, it seems rather confined."

"I told you, the problem is you're comparing it to an empress's sleeping chamber," I said with a wry grin.

Again, my room was just six mats large, and contained both a desk and a bed. So even with extra futons available, four people was the most you could hope to fit in here. I had assumed one or two of them would sleep in Shizuki's room, and maybe someone in the living room—but Myusel and Elvia had refused to leave my side ("I'm s'posed t' be your bodyguard, Shinichi-sama!"), so Petralka had refused, too ("We shall also stay in Shinichi's room to, ahem, help with bodyguarding"), and thus the four of us had ended up squeezing into my room.

Spending the night in the same room as three beautiful women struck me as—I don't know, dangerous? But my parents had no real objection (remember the assumption that I was a spineless coward who could never bring myself to lay a finger on a girl), and Shizuki flatly refused to have anyone stay in her room, so that was that.

Minori-san, true to her word, was in the van outside. Apparently it had a bunch of guns and ammunition in it—necessary to keep me safe, she claimed—so she didn't want to just let it sit out there by itself all night.

"Okay, you want to use the bed, Petralka? The rest of us can sleep on the floor."

"Hrm? Are we to be an outcast?" Petralka asked, annoyed.

"Not really," I said. "But somebody's got to take the bed."

"Hmm," Petralka grunted, her arms crossed. Then she clapped her hands. "That's it—a contest. We shall have a contest to determine who shall sleep on the bed."

"What kind of contest? You mean like soccer?" Elvia asked, her eyes sparkling.

"Nonsense. This room is much too small for soccer. Ahem, we will have—what was it? The standard form of combat in these situations. We saw it in a manga we read at your mansion, Shinichi. Myusel, you were there; do you not remember it?"

"Combat?" she asked.

"Using the bedding, like so."

"Oh! A pillow fight!" Myusel said, grinning.

Whoa, hang on, girls.

No pillow fights in a six-mat room, please! For that matter, think of the plastic models on my shelves! How is a pillow fight going to decide anything, anyway?!

"The victor shall have the right to determine their sleeping place!"

"Please, don't, I'm begging you!"

"For our reference, Shinichi, where do you plan to sleep? In the middle?"

"I think that would put my galaxy in danger of ecstasy," I said.

Sleeping smack between two gorgeous women? That sounded like a one-way ticket to a whole lot of very compromising situations.

"Hrm. But if we are forbidden to pillow fight, how then are we to settle this?"

"You don't have to settle anything," I insisted, but Petralka didn't seem to be listening to me.

"We have another idea! Myusel, the answer is—that thing. You know the thing. It is supposed to be secret, but somehow always appears and causes trouble when the heroine comes to the main character's room."

“Oh, it’s, uh—do you mean *erobooks*?”

“Yes, that’s it! Ero books!”

“What are you two even *talking* about?!” I wailed, but my cries continued to fall on deaf ears.

“The first person to find Shinichi’s ero books is the winner!”

“O-Okay... I’ll try my best!”

“I’m all over it!”

“No, don’t try! Don’t... be all over it!” I exclaimed, but finally I heaved a sigh. “Okay, I’ll sleep by the spot closest to the door. Petralka, you and the girls figure out the rest of the sleeping places with rock-paper-scissors or something. Just... no pillow fights, and no ero-book searches.”

“Mm? Where are you going, Shinichi?” Petralka asked.

“Out. I’m gonna see if Minori-san needs a hot drink or anything. It’s still cold out at night.”

“Oh, we’ll join you...” Myusel and Elvia offered, but I shook my head.

“I’m only going out the front door, I’ll be fine. I need you to watch out for Petralka—for Her Majesty. She’s way more important than I am.”

“Shinichi...” Petralka blinked at me as if surprised—but she stayed behind when I walked out into the hallway.

There had to be coffee or tea in the kitchen, I figured. I was headed for the stairs when—

“Oh...”

I ran into Shizuki coming the other way. She had probably just been getting a drink before she went to bed.

We stood there, neither of us saying anything. It didn’t feel good. It was so... stiff between us.

I forced myself to put on a calm expression, act like it didn’t bother me. I slid past Shizuki and was just about to go downstairs when—

“Looks like you’re having a good time,” I heard her mutter. “All those girls hanging off you. Even though you’re an otaku.”

“Aw, what?” I said, turning back toward her. I had to admit, her tone rankled me.

Shizuki, though, didn’t turn to look at me. But she didn’t move, either, so maybe she didn’t plan to just ignore me. Obviously, I couldn’t see her face from where I was standing.

“When a person’s brother disappears, do you have any idea how worried—” Then she stopped for a second, thought, and finally sighed

before she went on. “—any idea how much trouble it is? Believe me, it’s no fun.”

“Well, pardon me very much.”

“You could at least have let us know you were alive!”

“Er...” I scratched my cheek and frowned. Actually, I *couldn’t* have let them know. But I understood what Shizuki was saying. After a long moment, I just said, “Sorry.”

“Didn’t you...” Shizuki’s voice was a whisper, and she still wouldn’t look at me. There was a long, long pause before she finally said, “D-Didn’t you ever think I might blame myself?”

“*Huh*...?”

“Because... I just... because I kept... making fun of you, *otaku* this and *otaku* that... and then my brother... just...” Shizuki’s words were punctuated with loud sniffles, but I thought I could make out what she was saying. Basically, she had been afraid that I’d disappeared because I was sick of her mocking me. I’ll grant, it had been years since Shizuki and I had had a real conversation, since even before I’d shut myself in my room, so you couldn’t exactly say we had the best brother-sister relationship.

“No! God, no,” I said, trying to keep my tone light—why in the world would I run away just because my little sister wasn’t my biggest fan? But my attempt at lightheartedness seemed to backfire.

Shizuki looked back at me over her shoulder, her head turning so suddenly that I could practically see the sound effect: *krak!* “Then you should have let us know what happened! Do you have *any idea* how much everyone worried about you?”

It was hard to see her face in the dim hallway—was it just my imagination, or were her eyes brimming?

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At that second—

“““IS THIS ***REALLY*** A DERE MOMENT?!””” three voices chorused in unison.

Wait—*three* voices?

As Shizuki and I both looked around blinking, my mom and dad appeared from their bedroom down the hall.

“Did you see that, Mom? Shizuki is walking the path of a real, true tsundere!”

“I finally see we really raised her right...”

Uh... Excuse me? I think this is literally the definition of *wrong*—maybe so wrong that it does a three-sixty and... becomes right again? Aw, forget it.

Shizuki, though, gave a long, inarticulate groan of frustration. “I *hate* that! I hate that sort of talk, and I hate the way you all do it all the time!”

Then she ran into her room and slammed the door.

“Oh, Shinichi. You’ve upset your sister,” my mom said, looking at Shizuki’s door.

“Don’t try to pin this on me!”

“You’re the whole reason she’s upset,” my dad said pointedly. “Shizuki’s not wrong, though. When you go back to wherever it is, try to keep in touch once in a while, eh? We weren’t *that* worried about you, but it was pretty inconvenient not being able to talk to you at all.”

“Gee, thanks, Dad. I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

Chapter Three: Hullo, Akiba!

We emerged from under the green overhead rail to find ourselves in a country of dreams.

I drank in the avenue, a vast street running onward and onward. I spread my arms wide and said, “Akihabara! I have returned! Not that I’m going to shoot a nuclear bazooka at you or anything!”

The view of the holy land from the famous Mansei Bridge, so near and dear to my heart, looked just the way I remembered it. Okay, so some of the stores I knew were gone and others had replaced them, but so what? The view hadn’t changed much.

For better or for worse, it was still the hodgepodge it had always been. Roadways streaked this way and that, seemingly leading nowhere; people walked wherever they wanted, and it was impossible to ignore the signs for anime and games and manga. Even the Niku no Man*** building was there—the sort of thing that really lets you know you’re alive—as we headed onto the area’s main street.

“Ooh!” Petralka exclaimed, running ahead of me. “So this it is!”

She was dressed completely differently than normal. She was wearing a pinkish jacket with a polka-dot miniskirt, loose socks, and sneakers—and to top it all off she was wearing a ribbon, along with earmuffs and even a little bag. The whole enchilada.

It definitely made her pretty conspicuous, but Petralka had always been noticeably pretty anyway, and the outgoing, assertive outfit really suited her. Okay, it didn’t all exactly match, but at first glance she looked like a perfectly ordinary girl—even if she and her clothes came from Eldant.

That’s right: Petralka had brought this outfit with her from her home country. Apparently she had put it together based on careful observation of manga and anime. And you know what? It did have a certain “cosplay” vibe.

Now her eyes sparkled and she nearly launched herself down the street—except that Myusel and I each grabbed one of her hands.

“What is this, Shinichi? Myusel?” she said, frowning.

We had discovered something else interesting: when we were physically touching each other, our magic rings worked even here in Japan. I guess the rings, which functioned using the modicum of magical energy produced by our bodies, normally used the magic in the air around us as a medium to transmit our thoughts to other people, much like how sound waves travel through air. That was why they didn't work when there was no magic in the surrounding area but could still function when we were in physical contact with each other.

You know how in *Gun**m* they'll be in the vacuum of space, but people can still communicate by touching each other so that the sound waves travel directly from body to body? It's sort of like that.

I never really thought about it too hard, but I'm starting to wonder what exactly magical energy is.

It wasn't the first time on that trip the thought had occurred to me. Apparently the human body gave off a very small amount of whatever it was...

Okay, bracket that for now.

"Don't run around, it's dangerous. This is a pretty busy street."

"Hrm. These auto-mo-beels of yours. They do indeed seem profuse." Petralka nodded.

She had seen the LAV back in Eldant, of course, and on arriving here had gotten some firsthand experience of a small van, so she and the others had some sense of what a car was. Nonetheless, getting here and seeing so many of them must have been something to behold.

"Very well, then. Walking like this allows us to use the rings, anyway. You may take us by the hand, Shinichi." Petralka gave my hand a squeeze.

"Huh? Oh..." It was only then that it really sank in with me that I was *holding hands* with Petralka, her small, delicate fingers interlaced with mine. "Er, um, Petralka?"

"Yes, what?"

"H-Holding, I mean, hands like this... Don't you think it could be bad in... various ways?"

It was one thing to grab her hand to stop her from running into the street, but just to hang out, walking hand-in-hand? It seemed—*How should I put this, Your Majesty?*

"Was it not you yourself who took our hand in the first place? Come on, hurry and show us around!" Petralka started off, all but dragging me along.

“We see that it is a vast space indeed! We must hurry, or there won’t be time to see it all!”

“Er, right.”

Okay, fine.

Touring Akiba hand-in-hand with a beautiful young woman? Honestly, I had never even dreamed it. But if it would make Petralka happy, I would go along with her. As for the bashfulness, I would survive.

Or anyway, so I thought.

That was when someone else took my other hand. *Squeeze.*

“Um, Shinichi-sa—I mean, Master.”

It was Myusel.

I looked over to see her with her eyes cast toward the ground, her left hand at her chest, her right stretched out to take my hand. For reference, she wasn’t in her usual maid outfit just then—she was wearing a beige cardigan and a red-checked miniskirt, along with legwarmers and sneakers. She still had the fluffy cap on her head, and a similarly fuzzy scrunchie holding her hair back. Those were pretty distinctive, but overall she looked more or less like an average high-school girl.

Then again, Myusel’s whole “exotic beauty” thing made her stand out to begin with.

“Myusel...?”

“M-Master, it’s my duty t-to protect you and Her Majesty, so I thought... I th-thought, we should make sure we could communicate at any time...”

I guess there’s some logic to that...

“What is the matter? Shinichi, Myusel, let us go!”

“Yeah, sure, Your Majesty, don’t pull!”

“Call me Petralka!”

“Sorry...”

That was the quality of the conversation as Petralka, me, and then Myusel went walking hand-in-hand down the main avenue of Akihabara. I knew Minori-san and Elvia were following just behind...

“Ah, a young man in his prime.”

“*Ia dorou osura ekiru oto etapishitorappu.*”

“Well, his hands are both taken, but maybe you could jump on his back?”

“*Ti eodo osu!*”

I could hear Eldant and Japanese flowing freely; maybe the two of them were touching, too. And then a second later—

"Shinichi-sama!"

I could practically hear the *thump* as Elvia glommed on to my back.

Okay, wait, what is the deal here?

Myusel holding my left hand. Petralka holding my right. And Elvia riding piggyback.

It was complete: Full-Armor Shinichi's Beautiful Girl Shield!

Okay, no.

"Ooh, this must be a 'gei-sen' such as I've heard so much about!" Petralka said, dragging me off in a new direction. That meant I pulled on Myusel, and Elvia came along for the ride...

"Girls, we have to— This is *not* the way to stay hidden!"

Petralka, though, was too hyped up to listen to a word I said; Myusel just kept saying "I—I have to, it's my job"; and Elvia had her face buried in my back and was making comments like, "Mmm. It smells like you, Shinichi-sama."

As I've explained before, all of these girls were exceptionally pretty. They looked like foreigners (which, I guess, they were), and here in Akihabara they really stood out.

I could see people looking in our direction and talking, though they were too far away for me to catch what they were saying. Worse, some people had their cell phones out and appeared to be taking pictures...

"Minori-san...!" I looked to my WAC for help, but she just shrugged and grinned.

"You're really something, Shinichi-kun. You get more popular every day."

"That's not what I—"

"Ah, if only Minister Garius were here. I'll bet that would spice things up even more."

There's no hope. I can't count on her.

Defeated, I let Petralka drag me into the game center.

Let's turn back the clock about an hour.

"Dad, please give me some money!"

"Hrmph, absolutely not!"

My dad and I were squaring off in the living room. Mom and Shizuki were out.

"Grr. You didn't even think about it."

"Hmph. I didn't *have* to think about it," he said. "Anyway, where do you get off demanding money when you spent more than a year as a useless home security guard?"

"I'm always hurt when adults use such brutally honest words..."

"Hrm. An appeal to my empathy? I warn you, it won't work!"

My dad seemed inordinately proud of that fact.

"Whatever. Listen, I just need some cash!"

"What for? Are you completely obsessed with social-game ga*has?"

"No! I'm not you, Dad! Petralka says she wants to go to Akiba, okay?"

Yep: since we had come all the way to Japan, Petralka insisted that she wanted to see that otaku Mecca, that broadcasting station of otaku culture, Akihabara.

To be perfectly honest, I wasn't so sure that was a good idea, but thinking that maybe I should just count myself lucky she hadn't asked to go to Comiket, I decided to grant her wish if I could.

"And you can't *not* spend money in Akiba! You're surrounded by manga and DVDs and games and figures and character merchandise of all kinds! And Ichiban **ji and claw games aren't free, you know! You can never have enough money there! Money, money, money—an army needs funds...!"

"Ohh!! Hrgh, are you trying to make me weep tears of blood with that Ta**** Hiroshi-esque touch?!"

"Please!"

"Never!"

Bam! I brought my hands together in a gesture of supplication so hard you could hear it, but my dad put his hands above his head like an attacking black bear—a classic "mad dad" pose.

“If you won’t take no for an answer, then you’ll have to destroy me in combat!”

“So it’s to be the path of destruction...” I said, clenching my fist.

My dad, though, smirked triumphantly. “Hahaha. You take me too lightly, if you think you can beat your father. I attended a correspondence karate course for three months!”

“Dad...” I said. I looked at him for just a moment, then said, “Elvia?”

“Rawr!”

My dad cried uncle five seconds later.

“Th-That was dirty, Shinichi...” My dad sat twitching on our blood-streaked sofa after Elvia worked him over.

Okay, so the blood came from my dad’s nose after Elvia, holding him in a choke, pressed his head against her chest. He was pushing fifty, but I guess in some ways a man is always young.

Heck, maybe that’s why he was able to write light novels.

“Dirty? Don’t you have any better words? You’re an author, for crying out loud. Say, like, *dishonorable* or *unscrupulous* or something.”

“Hrm... One question, Shinichi.” My dad hefted himself up, looking puzzled. “Haven’t you been getting paid?”

“Huh...?” I said stupidly, and then I realized. “Oh yeah, my salary from being Amutech’s general manager...”

I hardly used money as such when I was in the Eldant Empire, so I had almost completely forgotten about it.

“Here’s your bank book, which you *left* here, by the way. There’s a pretty good chunk of change in there. We realized when the bank called asking if you didn’t want to open a CD.”

“That much?”

So the help-wanted ad on the internet may have been a total trap, but apparently they were actually respecting the salary as it had been posted. The Japanese government was honest about the strangest things. Maybe that was what you got for having such a hierarchical government, where each person just did what they were supposed to do without worrying about what anyone else was up to.

“But I lost fair and square—so take this and go,” my dad said, producing an envelope from the folds of the couch. “Leave the salary in your account and just let it grow. You never know when you might need it.”

I took the envelope and peeked inside: there were ten whole ten-thousand-yen bills in there. That was great and all, but the blood from my dad's nose had gotten on the envelope, so now it looked like I had killed somebody for it. *You sure about this, "Papa"?*

"Huh? You had this here all along?"

"Eh, y'know." My dad grabbed a wet wipe and started dabbing at the sofa. "My son brought home a girl for the first time. Several girls, in fact, all beautiful foreigners. What dad wouldn't want to help him look good?"

"Then why.....?" I asked, actually a little bit touched.

My dad nodded. "Form is beautiful."

"Uh-huh..."

That was my dad: passionately committed to the absurd.

Maybe *that* was why he was able to write light novels.

And that brings us back to the present moment, in Akihabara.

Petralka, Myusel, and Elvia were constantly shocked by what I guess you could call the culture gap.

"We have been wondering for some time," Petralka said, pointing at the buildings all around us. "What actually *is* this Akihabara of yours? Is it some kind of castle?"

"Huh? A castle?" I said.

"Is it not surrounded by walls in the far distance?"

"Oh..."

In a word, Petralka was seeing the skyscrapers. They were so far away that the skyline looked like a single solid wall. Considering how differently things were done in Eldant, it was an understandable mistake.

"We know that you must be seeking to protect your holy land—"

"That's not what we're seeking."

"—but as large as your walls are, there are vast gaps between them. Does this mean what we think it means? Are there giants, giants who assault this place? Do you get eaten? Are you *attacked* by these titans?"

"No, no, and no."

"Ahh, truly a holy place..."

Fine, let Petralka admire whatever she wanted about Akihabara, even if it was off-the-wall.

Then there was the person on the other side of me. Myusel was bowing to somebody.

“Ah, thank you for your hard work,” she was saying.

“Myusel?” I asked.

“Oh, Master. I was just greeting these other maids here.”

She was talking about some girls dressed up as maids, who were trying to get customers for one of the maid cafés that seemed to be springing up all over Akiba these days.

“Myusel, Myusel, those are ’layers working a part-time job.”

“Par-time? Ley-er?” She cocked her head in confusion.

Ahh! That gesture, like a songbird—it was heart-stoppingly cute, but forget about that.

“Er, what I’m saying is, they’re not real maids.”

“Oh my goodness...!”

She seemed maybe a little more surprised than necessary.

And then there was—

“Shinichi-sama, Shinichi-sama! The mural! The mural on the wall is moving!”

Elvia was shouting from her place on my back, or by this point, practically on my shoulders. She was pointing to the Diamond Vision screen on the side of one of the buildings.

Geez. Here I had one girl on each arm and one on my back, each of them looking in a different direction and excited about a different thing. If they had been kids instead, I wouldn’t have looked out of place as a teacher at some kindergarten somewhere. I finally felt some real sympathy for what a tough job they must have.

And it didn’t stop there.

“Tell us, Shinichi, why would these places have lanterns burning in the middle of the day?”

“Huh? Oh, those are display windows, and... uh...”

I found myself struggling to explain. The Eldant Empire had outdoor shops, but no concept of the display window, so it was hard to explain that the lighting was there to make the merchandise look more attractive. To Petralka and the others, “lanterns” were for indoor use, helping to light up dim interiors, and not something that went outside most of the time.

“Master, there are such colorful clothes here!” Myusel said, her eyes wide. She was pointing at a cosplay specialty shop. In the front window

were several outfits inspired by various anime and games. They were colorful, all right, but they looked even wilder here in the real world than they did in animation. Then again, for someone like Myusel who had no sense of what was “normal” attire in Japan, who knew how they looked?

“And so many maid uniforms...”

“Eh, there’s lots of different types.”

“It’s incredible...” Myusel said, her eyes shining as she looked at the outfits.

“Hey, wanna buy one?”

“Wha?” Myusel looked at me in surprise.

The expression was just so cute—I couldn’t help showing off a little. “Don’t worry, this army has funds. We can afford a cosplay outfit if we want,” I said, glancing at the prices on the display as I spoke.

It seemed like these outfits had gotten more affordable lately, to the point where with a lot of them, you would get change for a ten-thousand-yen bill. We would need to make sure we had money for food, but even then, we should be able to spare ten or twenty thousand yen each for fun.

“Which one do you like, Myusel? Is there anything here that strikes your fancy?”

“Oh, but...”

“Seriously, don’t worry about it. Let’s get one. That’s, uh, an order. Pick something out,” I said.

When I used that word, *order*, Myusel couldn’t put me off any longer. Okay, I felt a little bad forcing her, but it didn’t look like she was going to let me buy her something any other way.

“Okay, then.....” She looked over several of the outfits, at a bit of a loss, but then said... “Something characteristic of your country, Master.” With a hint of embarrassment, she pointed at something.

“Huh?”

I realized, to my surprise, that Myusel had picked out a kimono.

She had read plenty of manga herself back at our mansion, so she understood that this was a “period” outfit, something traditionally Japanese.

Also, though, there was no way a cosplay shop in Akihabara would have a normal kimono. Instead, everything would be from period-drama anime like *Sengoku BASA*A*, *Gin****, and *Ru**uni Kenshin*. They were all made to be easy to wear, too, for those of us who weren’t versed in

putting on traditional clothing. Still, for someone like Myusel, they would look plenty Japanese.

Hmm. But when it comes to kimono in anime, it's always lady ninjas or lady martial artists or lady swordspeople who wear them. Huh, but I guess there is the apron-like *kappougi*; that's Japanese, too. Since Myusel already wore her maid uniform all the time, though, I didn't want to get her something that would be like just another work outfit. I wanted something she could wear out if she felt like it.

This was tough! I had to think hard about what I was getting, or I might end up having to buy a bunch of accessories, too.

But as I was trying to work all this out...

"What is it you are dawdling over?" Petralka demanded, pulling me by the hand. I almost stumbled as I took a step toward her.

"Sorry, Petralka. What did you need?"

"You are paying attention exclusively to Myusel!"

Her Majesty was in a royally bad mood.

...Sorry, I slipped.

In any event, Her Royal Majesty was awfully cute puffing out her cheeks in annoyance. She had stopped arguing with Myusel in quite the way they had at first, but she still definitely wanted to be number one, and I guess I couldn't blame her. What with being an empress and all.

"Look, I didn't mean to—sorry, Myusel, we'll pick something out later."

"Yes, Master," Myusel said with a half smile and a nod.

"Sorry, Petralka. Is there an outfit or anything you'd like to buy?"

No matter how you cut it, nothing here was likely to cost more than a fraction of anything Petralka wore on a regular basis—and when it came to the faux accessories, it would be just a fraction of a fraction.

Petralka, though, pointed down the street and said, "Shinichi, what about those people vending fabulous crafts right out in the open? Do they not fear attack by thieves?"

She was pointing to some people selling cheap accessories from a table on the sidewalk covered with a velvet cloth. In Japan, with its advanced machining and metal-refining technologies, trinkets like those were unremarkable, but for a princess—er, empress—from another world with Middle-Ages technology, they must have seemed like rare treasures.

"And look, Shinichi! Look at all these tiny statues!"

Now she was fawning over a gacha**n machine. A case next to it displayed the figurines so you could see what you might get.

"Why so shocked?" I asked. "The dwarves make stuff like that all the time, don't they?"

"True, yes, but—hrk! Is that not the foreman from *Gaishi*?!"

Her eyes went from huge to huger.

"Oh... I get it."

Theme counted for a lot. There were plenty of manga series for which you could only get figures—including those of minor characters—from gacha**n.

"We want this, Shinichi, we want it! Hrm? How does one purchase these things? The lid of this container refuses to open."

"Here, look," I said, taking out some small change and putting it in the machine. I turned the handle and *click-klunk!* Out came a capsule.

"Ooooh!" That was Petralka, suitably impressed by everything she saw. It was awfully cute.

But...

"Grr. What is this? It's wrong, this is not the foreman!"

"Yeah, it's kind of a lottery. You're not guaranteed to get the one you want. That's part of the f—"

"Arrgh! The foreman! Produce the foreman!"

To all appearances completely ignoring me, Petralka grabbed onto the gacha**n machine in a way that made her vaguely resemble a koala and started shaking it.

What are you doing, Your Majesty? I wanted to ask—but we had bigger problems, like how conspicuous this made us, or for that matter the fact that we might get the police called on us! The squad from the Mansei Bridge police box would rush over, and we would be sent up a river that Tokyo didn't even have!

People were definitely starting to notice what was going on, and naturally, a few of them were even pulling out their phones... I couldn't have Petralka ending up on some internet list: "12 Foreign Girls Hanging from Gacha**n Machines—You Won't Believe No. 8!!"

Actually, I was probably already too late.

"Okay, we'll get your foreman, just calm down!" I all but shouted as I desperately searched for more change.

So you see how it was going.

.....

“There! *There!* Argh, what are you doing?!”
“Hey, this is harder than it l—”
“Step aside, we shall do it ourselves! .....Ahh?!”
“See? Not so easy, huh?”
“Bah, we shall try again!”
The two of us must have sounded pretty hopeless. The claw game we were trying promptly consumed three thousand of our yen.

.....

“And so, this is where we’re going to have lunch!”
“Really, Shinichi-kun? We have a national leader in tow, and we’re taking her to Go! **! Curry?”
“When in Rome, right?”
“We could at least go to Niku ** Mansei or something.”
“But we just had meat yesterday.”
“Let’s at least do Fuji ****, then.”
“And you think *that’s* a better place to take a VIP?”
Notwithstanding my ongoing discussion with Minori-san, we walked into Go! **! Curry.
“Hm. This aroma of spices we detect does indeed provoke the appetite.”
“Right? You’re about to sample a quintessential part of Japan’s culinary culture, Your Majesty,” I said. Minori-san might or might not have shot back *“Is curry really Japanese food culture?”* but I ignored her. Indian curry was a quantifiably different thing; surely I was within my rights to call Japanese curry part of the local culinary scene.
“Come on, give it a try, Petralka.”
“Mm. M... Mrrgh... grff...?!”
“P-Petralka, what’s wrong?”
“Wagh—wagha—wugherr!”
“*Water!* Right, water...!”

“Phew! What is this thing, Shinichi?! Poison?!”

“You take that back! It’s just a little spicy!”

“A *little* spicy?” Petralka’s eyes were watering.

I realized Myusel and Elvia had had the same reaction. I guess for the non-curry-experienced among us, the food had come out the gate swinging. The spice was pretty average as curry went—I might even have gone so far as to say it wasn’t very spicy at all—but I guess if you had never tried it before, it might catch you off guard.

“Do you eat such punishing food often, Shinichi?”

“Punishing? It’s good!”

One silent girl.

Two silent girls.

“Shinichi.”

“Yeah...?”

“W-We might see fit to, ahem, t-try ourselves against one more mouthful.”

“Ooh, gonna go for it, Your Majesty? That’s what makes you the empress!”

“We find ourself feeling, Shinichi, that *we* are the strange one not to like what you so clearly enjoy. Give to us from that plate of yours. We presume it is not spicy?”

“No, they’re the same. I already ate from this plate, that okay?”

“We do not care; give it to us.”

“Okay, okay.”

Silence.

“Petralka?”

“Hrmph, you are the most oblivious! Here! Ahh!”

“Ah... Ahhh...”

And so, there in the Go! **! Curry restaurant, I found myself forced into some very embarrassing “role-playing.”

.....

“Shinichisama!!”

“Wait, Elvia, watch out for—”

Tmp! Tmptmp! Elvia bounced on the dance-game platform with light, nimble footsteps. With her superhuman physical abilities, a capacity to see motion befitting a predator, and her incredible reflexes, she had been shattering one record after another. Elvia had always loved art, but it looked like maybe she had a talent for music, too.

I found it all amusing—at first.

As the music got faster and faster, though, Elvia’s movements got more violent, too.

“Hang on, what’s happening over there?”

“Trippin’! Get a load of that girl!”

“Naw, man, there, by her skirt—”

“A tail?”

“Some kinda cosplay?”

“But it’s moving...”

The peanut gallery was getting a little too interested, so Minori-san and I jumped up on the dance platform, dragged Elvia down, and beat feet.

.....

“This tower—is this tower the fabled Library?!”

“It’s a bookstore, Petralka. A bookstore. They sell books.”

“The entire interior of this tower is full of books?! And for *sale*?”

“It is quite something...” Myusel agreed.

They were gazing up at that famous Akiba landmark, the Shosen Boo* Tower.

They were plenty impressed by the escalators running up and down the building, but as I expected, the thing they loved most was the shelves upon shelves of books.

“*Oo?! Eresu era inamu uen sunoitasshirubappu!*” Ohh?! All these brand-new releases!

“*Shi, itosejamu, shi, itosejamu, esu anime noisure gaishi...*” Your Majesty, Your Majesty, it’s a gazette of the *Gaishi* anime...

“*Oo, Myuseru ti netofoo dido!*” Oh, well done, Myusel!

“Shinichi-sama, Shinichi-sama, *sisu kuubu fo sugunitoniabu ia tonau shisu kuubu fo sugunitoniabu ekunisu ti sukurou iruguniradone esaerubu ibu ti ekunisu gunisuina si dirakku touo esaerubu ibu ti!*” I want this art collection, this one! I’ll work extra hard, just *please* get it for me! I’ll do anything!

“Ooh, they have the latest issue of *Super-M Spectacles*! ♪”

Everyone, even Minori-san, was really into it.

“You know,” Myusel said, taking my hand once more as she came back to me, “think how happy Eduardo-san would be in a place like this...”

“Oh, yeah. They’ve got more light novel series than you could read in a lifetime.”

This wasn’t even a light-novel specialty place, and the shelves were still packed with them.

Speaking of Eduardo, he had asked for copies of my dad’s books. I would have to grab a set before I went home. We should have plenty of comp copies lying around the house.

...Wait.

“Master?” Myusel looked at me, puzzled. “Is something the matter?”

“Hmm... Well, nothing serious. But I just thought of going back to Eldant as ‘going home.’”

“I’m sorry?” Myusel said, blinking at me.

I guess it made sense that it didn’t make sense to her.

Maybe was a little late for me to be realizing that the Eldant Empire had gotten so close to my heart that I thought of it as home. I actually felt more comfortable with the idea of going home to Eldant than I had at coming “home” to Japan. Maybe that was just a kind of escapism? Then again, maybe not.

If I did feel unexpectedly at ease in Eldant, though, it was probably because there were so many people there who accepted me. Myusel and Petralka, for instance; Elvia, Garius, Zahar, Loek and Romilda, all the students at school—so many people.

“Good Lord, Shinichi,” Petralka said. She had come up and taken my right hand while I was lost in thought. “This place is bulging with BL, too.”

Minori-san was buying an armload of BL stuff, screeching and hurrah-ing. I hardly recognized her.

“Perhaps it would have been good to bring Garius along,” Petralka said slyly.

“I can’t imagine a better description of Hell,” I said.

“No?”

“...Well, maybe we should get Garius-san some souvenirs. I can’t imagine Lauron and the doll are going to go undiscovered the entire time we’re gone. I bet he’ll be wishing for some relief by the time we get back...”

“Mm, an excellent idea. We shall also bring something for Zahar, as well as our attendants and the royal guard.” Petralka, sounding pleased, let go of my hand and went over to join Minori-san. Apparently she just meant to pick out some random BL books.

“And that might *not* be a good idea,” I said with a wry smile. Even so, I wasn’t feeling half bad as, hand-in-hand with Myusel, I watched the girls enjoy the bookstore.

It was Minori-san who noticed the disturbance first.

Maybe that only made sense. After all, Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia didn’t know what was normal in Akihabara—or anywhere in Japan, for that matter. The usual, the typical, the standard meant nothing to them here. And because to the Japanese people around us they were so obviously foreigners, nobody paid them much mind, either.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

We had just come out of the Shosen Book **wer, and I noticed that Minori-san didn’t look pleased.

“Hmm... Nothing much. Something feels off,” she whispered to me.

Her face was set, extremely serious. The laid-back air that usually hung around her had vanished. I knew this was how she got in her “JSDF mode”—when she was busy being a soldier charged with the protection of her country.

Granted, maybe she would have looked a little cooler if she hadn’t been carrying a bag overflowing with BL books, but never mind.

“I guess they’re not *that* unusual, this being Akiba.”

“What’s not that unusual?”

“I know Myusel and the others must look like them, too.”

“Seriously, fill me in—look like what?”

“Like foreigners.”

Minori-san had her hand at the small of her back and was working it around. It looked a little like she was giving herself a massage, but I knew that underneath her oversized top, she had hidden her 9mm in exactly that spot.

I kind of thought a shoulder holster was the more traditional place to conceal a weapon, but according to Minori-san, with some body types that could make the shoulder bulge too much, giving you away at a glance. The hip made better sense for those people. *"And it's easy to draw,"* she'd said. *"Although it makes driving a pain."*

Anyhow...

"Maybe I'm just imagining it. Hmm..."

"Well, Akiba's pretty famous even overseas. Everyone knows all the otaku come here."

"Yeah, you're right." She let out a breath and nodded.

But an instant later—

Thump!

Minori-san dropped her books to the ground and set off running so fast she practically left a dust cloud behind her. She covered several meters in a matter of seconds, heading towards a narrow alleyway where a lens was pointed in our direction...

"A lens...?" I muttered, but Minori-san already had her target in hand, dragging them out of the alley with their arm bent.

"H-Hey, whaddaya doin'?"

"Don't try anything funny. Let's start with your name and national affiliation."

"Whahuh?!" The guy half-screamed, partly because of Minori-san's deadly tone, but mostly because she had his arm in a lock.

I took him to be roughly thirty. He was kind of pudgy, and his hair was messy. He was wearing a checked shirt and washed jeans, carrying a backpack—but in his hands was a bulky single-lens reflex camera.

If there was anyone who screamed "otaku" louder than this guy, I hadn't met him.

"F-Forget my name! And what do you mean, national affiliation? I'm Japanese, for crying out loud!" Mr. Otaku sounded pretty well terrified.

I looked at him and Minori-san. "Uh, Minori-san, you think maybe he's just an otaku or a, y'know, camera punk...?"

Okay, so maybe he was a little old to call a punk.

Minori-san took a long, hard look at the poor guy she had in an arm lock. Finally she said, “You think?”

“Whatever you think, just let me go! Ow, you’re—you’re hurting me!”

“Uh, sorry,” Minori-san said, and set him free.

“Geez, what even the heck?” The camera punk (?) shot Minori-san a dirty look, but almost immediately, he turned to the rest of us, his face shining.

Well, not *all* of the rest of us. More specifically, Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia.

“If you’ve got a bodyguard like her, then you’ve all *got* to be the real thing, right?!”

“Uh... What?” I said. Minori-san was equally perplexed at the punk (?)’s behavior.

He looked positively elated. In fact, he started coming toward us, still smiling, brandishing his camera. It looked like it was probably a digital camera, but a big, expensive one, the sort of thing that would look more at home in the hands of a war photographer or something.

“‘The real thing’...?”

“Have you ladies come to Japan for a promotional tour? Can I take your picture?”

“Promotional tour?” I said, still confused. “Hang on just a second, what are you talking ab—”

The camera punk (?) pulled out his phone to show me something. “This, obviously!”

With a few quick swipes, he had taken us to YouTube.

A video-sharing site?

“Wait, this...”

“Ahh! This video is on my favorites list, and I’ve watched it so many times! I knew it was you the minute I saw you!”

The phone might have had a small screen, but there was no mistaking it: there was Petralka in full magical girl regalia, frills and everything, waving her “magic wand” around.

“Shinichi?” Petralka said, clearly about to demand to know what we were doing. But as she was coming over to us, she spotted the phone’s screen and froze.

“Th... That’s...”

“And I’ve got clips of your other actresses, too,” the camera punk (?) enthused, pulling up videos of Myusel and Elvia. It was footage from our soccer tournament—even Minori-san was visible if you looked hard enough.

“I heard that movie was in production hell because no one would pay for it, but if you’re here in Japan to promote it, then it *must* be coming out!”

Camera Punk (?) sounded genuinely really thrilled about this.

Minori-san groaned, “That’s—”

“—the leaked footage,” I concluded.

Yep: you might remember the time we held a soccer tournament and some of the JSDF’s video of the event leaked onto the internet. Now this guy was proudly displaying not only that clip, but the fake making-of documentary for a nonexistent movie we’d constructed in hopes of throwing people off the scent.

Shoot, shoot, shoot. I’d completely forgotten.

I know: I was the one who suggested creating the fake footage and deliberately putting it onto the net. I of all people knew how many views those clips had gotten. But I hadn’t counted on somebody so eagle-eyed, so dedicated, so obsessed, that they would not only remember what the actors looked like, but would immediately recognize Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia in their disguises.

“I knew we should have tried to blend in...”

By standing out, we had drastically increased the chances that someone would notice us. But it was too late now to cry over spilled milk.

Minori-san and I glanced at each other, trying to decide what to do.

Petralka made it a moot point.

“*You far-get thaaaat!!*” she howled, grabbing Camera Punk (?) by the collar—or really, dangling from it—in a red-faced rage.

We ended up explaining to Camera Punk (?) that we weren’t promoting, but taking a little trip on the sly, and begged him not to photograph us.

He seemed like a decent guy: disappointed, sure, but he didn’t press the point or give us any trouble. He just wished Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia a fun time in Japan, shook their hands, and left.

“Geez. That was a close call, but I guess we’re in the clear,” Minori-san said with a little sigh. “How about we take a breather somewhere?” And so we ended up at a nearby shop.

You know what kind of shop I mean.

“*Hel*-lo, Master-sama! And young lady-samas!”

A young woman in a maid uniform gave us a polite little bow. I nodded and replied with a magnanimous wave of my hand, and in we went.

Minori-san was giving me a look, and it wasn’t an especially happy one. Personally, I thought this was a good idea; the shop was up on the second floor of its building, which would get us away from Akihabara’s foot traffic and prying eyes for a while.

“‘Young lady-samas’?!” Myusel and Elvia exclaimed. Still not helping them blend in.

If you hadn’t guessed by now, we were in a maid café. I’d gone out of my way to pick a place I was familiar with.

“...I guess I should count us lucky you didn’t just pick a random McDo**ld’s or a Matsu** or something.”

“Hm, yeah, maybe one of those would have been better.”

“How could they possibly be better?” Minori-san shot me a glare.

“This way, sir,” a maid said to me, showing us inside. “What will you have *to*-day, Master?” She made a show of cocking her head.

...Huh? I kept detecting a little catch in her pronunciation. Was it possible this maid... wasn’t Japanese? I was so used to the weirdness of Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia’s Japanese by now that I hardly noticed it, not to mention how rarely you heard words like *Master* in real life. But now that I thought about it...

Hmm. It wasn’t quite the same thing Minori-san had been talking about earlier, but Akihabara had apparently acquired quite an international flavor. This girl did look kind of Japanese at first glance, so maybe she was Chinese or Korean... From somewhere in Asia, anyway.

I looked around and realized we were the only customers in the café. Dang. I had been hoping there would be more people here.

“What do you recommend?” I asked, even though I already knew what she would say. Half the point of going to a maid café is to chat with the maids, and a real pro knows how to get a little conversation out of them.

“Re-com-mend...” She cocked her head for a second, puzzled, but then she nodded. “I recommend *this* omurice!”

“Oh? What do you recommend about it?”

There was a long moment as the maid seemed to wrestle with something, then she finally said, “It is delic-*ious*.”

“Uh... oh,” I said, feeling a little let down. “Well, uh, okay then I’ll take —let’s see, I already had lunch, so—one of those. And then...”

“Black tea for all of us,” Minori-san said before I could finish.

“Yes, ma’am,” the maid said, then vanished into the back with a nod.

I watched her g—

“Hey, stop, Myusel.” I grabbed her hand as she went to follow the maid into the kitchen as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, well if they’re going to serve you tea, Master, I thought I should help.”

“No, look, you don’t have to.”

I guess you can take the maid out of the service, but you can’t take the... service out of the maid, or something. It looked like it made Myusel uncomfortable when there was work to be done and she wasn’t helping.

“Are you sure...?”

“Totally. You’re a customer here, Myusel, not an employee, so you can relax.”

“O-Okay.” She sat back down hesitantly.

“Hmm,” I mumbled. “I wonder if this place is under new ownership. Or maybe they just stopped doing that.”

“Doing what?” Minori-san asked.

“Oh, it’s just, when I came here before, the Master Maid Artist Yuumi-chan would put a picture of your favorite character on the omurice. I don’t recognize that girl serving us, either.”

“...You were a real regular here, huh?”

“I don’t know if I’d say that. I was a shut-in, remember. I think I only came here a couple of times before I stopped leaving my room. The rest I learned by looking at the website. Maybe you could call me an *ir*-regular.”

“*Ir*-regular?”

Elvia, though, had latched on to a completely different facet of our conversation. “She will make picture?” she asked.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said, linking my hand with hers as if she were some stranded extraterrestrial. (That’s how we got the magic rings to work, after all.) “She uses an ingredient called ketchup instead of paint. She’ll

draw any character you like on your meal. Or she used to. It looks like they don't do that anymore. Too bad..."

"Don't worry, Shinichi-sama, just leave it t' me! I'll do it! Even if I don't know what *kechappu* and *omu-raisu* are!"

"Er, sure, thanks," I said. In my mind, this was in the same category as latté art—it was a very different set of skills from regular painting, and I wasn't sure Elvia would find it so easy. "Look, don't worry about it. We're going to have to—"

"Congratu*la*tions!!" someone shouted. There was the *pop!* of a noisemaker.

Minori-san's hand went straight to her back, while Myusel and Elvia both tensed up, ready for a fight.

The maid from earlier appeared, smiling. "Sir, you're our one hundred thousandth cus*to*mer!"

"Huh?"

How else was I supposed to react to that announcement? One hundred thousand people? Was this place really that popular?!

For that matter, why was she bringing this up now? Wasn't that usually the sort of thing you announced when the customer walked in the door?

The maid, though, kept me from asking questions with a show of sheer enthusiasm. She was pushing a cart with four parfaits piled high with ice cream, which she placed on the table.

"Ooh!"

"Amazingh!"

"It looks very good..."

Response from the Eldant contingent was swift and positive. Even Minori-san looked surprised.

"This is our number-one recommendation, the Jumbo Ice Cream Parfait!"

"Yeah, I can see that, but I didn't ask for—"

"It's a free gift for our one hundred thousandth honored customer!" the maid broke in, like she thought the conversation was some kind of competition. Then, still smiling, she grabbed me by the arm and started to pull, hard. "Also, for our honored male *cus*tomer, there is a special free service! A cosplay photo ses*sion* with a maid! This way, please!"

"What? Er, gee, uh, really?"

Had they ditched the omurice art and started doing this instead?

The maid nodded with a big smile. "Yes, sir! Very really!"

"Uhh... Okay, well, I guess I'll be right back," I said.

"Mm!" Petralka nodded, already entirely fixated on her ice-cream treat, and I let the maid drag me toward the back of the store. Specifically, through a door out of the room where Myusel and the others were sitting...

"...*Now*, then." The maid closed the door with a *clack*, then locked it.

Huh? Locked?

"Your special service, honored customer—I me*an*, Master." As I stood there confused, she grinned a bit nastily and licked her lips. She was extremely alluring.

"This 'special service'..."

"It's *very spe*cial."

As she spoke, the maid slipped off her apron, then quickly stripped off her dress, too—wait, what? What was going on here?!

"No, hold on, I—"

"Don't be so dif*fi*cult, Master."

I didn't have time to stop her. The maid was already in her underwear, advancing on me as I backed away.

Two steps. Three. Then I felt the wall behind me. There was nowhere to go.

I could only stand there panicking as the maid took me with both hands and licked her lips again.

What was going on? What was going on? *What the heck was going on?!*

Her hands found their way to my collar, slipping inside my clothes. Why did she seem so used to this?! Even as I was trying to figure things out, though, her pale fingers were brushing my skin, my skin my skiiiiiinnnn.

"Ah, ahhhh, when it comes to—to maid-sans, I guess I'm used to M-M-Myusel, I thought, but, somehow such a proactive maid is really fresh and new!"

"Do you *li*ke maids, sir?"

"They're my favorite thing!"

"Tha*t's* good to hear. Please *en*joy me, then."

The maid was wearing a beguiling smile—and nothing else.

No! I mustn't! I mean, I don't know exactly why, but I mustn't, mustn't let myself get swept along, mustn't, but ahhhhhh!

I went weak at the knees and slid right down the wall. The maid crouched over me and smirked again.

"Heh heh heh..."

Then she took off the frilly headband she was wearing. It unleashed her luxurious black hair, which cascaded down her—

"Hhhggh!!"

When I saw that, something inside me snapped.

"Wha*t's* wrong?"

"Yaaaah!" I cried and shoved the maid with all my strength.

I must have caught her by surprise, because she went stumbling backward and ended up on the floor just like me. I didn't waste a moment: I jumped to my feet and pointed at her with a gesture so emphatic I could almost see the *fwah!*

"Bad! Bad! Not good! Wrong, wrong, wrong!"

"...Huh?"

"Your headband! Your frilly headband! It's the symbol of maid-dom! The one great thing that distinguishes maids from everyone else! And you deliberately *took it off*!"

"...Huh? Oh." The maid felt at her own head, surprised.

Well, she wasn't *actually* a maid, of course. She was just a naked woman.

"A maid who removes her headband is no maid at all! She's just a woman!" I exclaimed, but inside I was thinking, *That was close!*

Honestly, her taking off that headband had broken the spell, and for that I was grateful. Otherwise, the whole situation might have just swallowed me up, and who knows what I would have ended up doing?

I mean... if it were really a "special service," then maybe it would have been okay? But not with Myusel and Petralka and Elvia and Minori-san all right in the next room!

"...Grr," the naked woman said, grimacing. There followed a stream of words I couldn't understand.

Huh? What was that?

I didn't know what language she was speaking, but from the sound, I might have guessed Chinese.

Another woman emerged from the shadows of the room, but this one was wearing a normal pantsuit. She said something, too. She was holding a camera, albeit one that didn't hold a candle to the one Camera Punk (?) had been wielding earlier.

What was this? A badger game?

Wait... Chinese?

Did that mean...

"Shinichi-sama!!"

The door burst open, the last breeze from a serious blast of wind magic blowing into the room.

Something else came flying in, too: Minori-san, holding her 9mm at the ready. "Shinichi-kun, are you okay?!"

I guess all the commotion—my shouting, the sound of the woman going flying—had given my friends the sense that something was wrong. Behind Minori-san were Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia, all rushing into the room and—

"...Hang on. What *are* you doing in here?" Minori-san said, eyeballing me.

"Huh?" I said. "I—"

There was me, standing there. There was a buck-naked woman (the former maid) flat on her bottom beside me. There was only one thing to say at a moment like this.

"It's not what it looks like!"

"Shinichi-sama..."

N-No, Myusel, please don't look at me with that surprise and disappointment!

But just as I was trying to figure out how to explain myself...

There was a burst of foreign language, the naked woman and the camera woman having a short, sharp conversation. Then they both retreated toward the back of the room, kicking open some kind of back door.

"Hey, wait—!" Minori-san made to go after them, but a little lump of something came rolling across the ground.

It looked like a small can with a lever attached. In fact, it looked a lot like a—

"Grenade?!"

"Get down!" Minori-san shoved me aside and flung herself on top of it.

At the edge of my vision I could see Elvia, grasping the situation, shove Myusel and Petralka down the same way, covering them.

And then...

“.....Huh?”

The explosion, the shockwave, the flash of light, the fire—none of it ever came.

After a long moment, Minori-san sat up, staring intently at the hand grenade. Finally, she decided to pick it up off the floor.

“We’ve been had! This is a dummy.”

“...Oh.”

In other words, they’d had what amounted to a toy grenade on hand to buy some time when they needed to get out of Dodge.

Myusel and the others, realizing there was no danger, sat up, too.

And *then*...

“...Oh.”

I thought I heard a clattering from a locker on one side of the room—and then it suddenly fell over, the impact knocking the door open. Something rolled out from inside—a naked woman, bound and gagged.

“Don’t tell me...” Minori-san said. She started opening the other lockers, the ones that hadn’t fallen over, and found a person inside each and every one of them. Three young women in maid outfits, and four men. Evidently, Thelma and Louise had tied them up and stuffed them in there. They constituted the café’s employees and customers.

Minori-san’s expression was grim. “This is...”

“Shinichi,” Petralka said, blinking and looking from us to the hog-tied crowd. “Is this what you call ‘role-play’?”

“That is so wrong!” I practically shouted.

What the heck had been going on there?

We had a few theories—but not enough evidence to prove any of them. And the question of *why* always remained. We just didn’t have the information.

Anyway...

Apparently, the parfaits the fake maid had served us had been laced with sedatives. Elvia had stopped Petralka from trying the food.

In the other world, whether in the Eldant Empire or the Kingdom of Bahairam, most drugs were of the herbal variety, the kind you had to mash up and mix in with other ingredients. If nothing else, they certainly didn't have lab-spliced stuff made with complicated chemistry. So when one of those weird engineered drugs came up, it smelled really strange to Elvia with her sharp nose. That's what saved Myusel and the others from dropping off to dreamland under the influence of powerful sedatives.

That was why the fake maid had been so aggressive with me—she'd assumed my friends were out cold.

"Seriously though, what was going on there?" I said as we went down the stairs.

"I didn't hear much, but that was definitely Chinese," Minori-san said.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "It might have been Korean, or some other language. The pronunciation did sound a lot like Chinese, but I don't know enough Chinese to have any idea what they were talking about. Besides, then there's all those regional differences like Mandarin versus Cantonese and everything."

"Yeah, I don't know much about it either. I only know it smells fishy." Minori-san frowned. "Maybe that's why the Black Suit Brigade tried to force themselves on us."

"You mean those guys with the van?"

"Yeah. There's always the possibility that something's leaked out to a foreign country. And that that other country might think maybe they could catch a VIP—you, say—off guard and kidnap you, or blackmail you with a honey trap or something."

After a moment I asked, "Should we really have just left everyone like that?"

"The police will be there soon. I'm sure it'll be fine."

We had freed the customers and employees the fake maid and her friend had tied up and stuffed in those lockers. Once the gags were out of their mouths, the one thing everyone wanted to know was what in the world was going on, but that was something even we weren't really sure about. So instead, we put that café behind us like *we* were the ones on the lam.

"Anyway, now we know for sure: we can't keep doing things on our own. We have to get in touch with the Ministry of Defense in Ichigaya and __"

Minori-san was about to step onto the street outside the maid café building when she stopped.

"What's up?" I asked. I came up alongside her and looked out at the street—and then I froze, too.

Outside was a crowd of dozens—no, maybe hundreds. And as soon as they noticed us at the door, every single one of them pulled out a smartphone or a digital camera and started taking pictures, movies, anything they could get. It was the middle of the day, so you didn't have the stereotypical sea of camera flashes, but even so, I felt like a beloved baseball player coming back from abroad—or maybe a famous actor caught in adultery or something. Not that it was the actual mass media out there taking pictures...

"Wh-What the heck?!"

"What's going on?"

"What is this?"

Me, Myusel, and Petralka—both just behind me, holding my hands—were all very surprised.

Our reaction only seemed to make the chatter and the sound of clicking shutters get louder.

This had to be a case of mistaken identity. I mean, these people had been *waiting* out there to get our pictures. But why?

"Do they all have the same fixation as—"

Camera Punk (?)?

But how in the world did they figure out we were in this maid café?

"Taking mad pix!" One of the people who had taken up a position closest to us and was snapping away with his smartphone—he must have been just past twenty years old—suddenly started swiping and tapping on his screen. I zipped over to catch a glance of what he was doing.

"Oh..."

"Huh? What?" He looked at me innocently. On the screen of his phone I could see the Twitter app running.

"Minori-san, they're tweeting about us! I think we've got a wildfire on our hands here!"

Now the pieces were falling into place. Someone—whether it was the alley-skulking Camera Punk (?) or someone else like him—had snapped some pictures of us and uploaded them to the web. Specifically, pictures of

Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia having fun in Akihabara. And now it looked like half the internet had seen them.

They'd been identified as the girls from the movie teaser that had leaked on YouTube. The mysterious fantasy film had been a big deal on the net for a while, but then it was reported that the movie had been shelved due to lack of funding, a rumor that drew plenty of outcry. And now the actresses—including the star!—were here in Akihabara. When word got out, everyone decided to come see for themselves...

We had been in Akihabara all day, making no real attempt to fly under the radar, and this was what we got. We had been careless—but it was too late for regrets now.

First things first: we had to get out of there.

"Minori-san!"

"We have to get to the car!" Minori-san said. Still holding Petralka and Myusel by the hands, I dove into the crowd. Most of them were just onlookers and didn't try to get in our way. I pushed through, using my own body to part the crowd. Going straight through meant plenty of people got our pictures, but we couldn't worry about that.

"Minori-san," I called, "take care of Elvia!" But when I glanced back to make sure she heard me, I found that Minori-san had been swallowed up in a wave of bodies. I couldn't even see her.

Elvia, however, was there, still hanging onto my back.

"Minori-san? *Minori-san!*" I shouted, but there was no answer.

Minori-san, where did you go?!

Just as I was starting to really panic—

"Hey, hey, you're the girls from that movie, right?"

"You know, the video on YouTube?"

"Mind if I snap a few pics?"

"Hey, wait up, let me get another shot!"

"Three famous actors are fleeing right now! You won't believe number __"

It was one thing after another as people pressed in around us. At first they had been giving us a respectful distance, but as it became obvious that we were trying to get away, people started shoving, bent on getting a photo or saying hello. To be fair, if I'd been in their shoes, I would have done the same thing.

"Ugh..."

“What is it, Shinichi? What are they all saying?”

“Master...”

“Shinichi-sama, what d’you wanna do? Should I punch us a way out?”

The girls were all at least as confused as I was. These people weren’t “enemies” exactly; they didn’t want to hurt us, and it wouldn’t have been right to harm anyone trying to force our way past. But...

“Seriously, what are we supposed to do—Minori-san?!” I cried, completely at a loss.

Then I heard shouting.

“Yikes!”

“Watch out!”

The yelling was almost drowned out by a screeching siren. A moment later, people scattered as two cars pulled up through the crowd.

Both were imposing black vehicles, both a foreign make.

Chevrolet—that was an American manufacturer, right?

And then...

“Kanou Shinichi!”

The window of one of the cars opened, and a man with golden hair and blue eyes—an American straight out of central casting—leaned out and shouted my name.

What? Why? I don’t think I know any Americans!

“Mi-noh-ri is oh-kay! Get in!”

He knew Minori-san’s name. So... was he a friend? Come to think of it, I thought I had heard something about the JSDF conducting joint training exercises with the American military in Japan on a pretty regular basis...

While I was hesitating, one burly white guy and one burly black guy hopped out of the car, shoved the onlookers out of the way, and pointed to the back seat.

“You won’t get anywhere out here!” one of them said.

“Argh...!” I knew he was right. We couldn’t stick around—especially not with the police still on their way to investigate the fake-maid incident.

“Myusel, take care of Petralka,” I said.

“Yes, sir!” she said.

Then I told her to get in the first car. Elvia and I would go for the second one. Why had I picked this arrangement? I just figured Petralka would be happier with someone from her own nation than being looked after by a former Bahairamanian spy.

“Petralka, get in that car! We’re getting out of here!” I said—and then I made a run for the back seat of the second car.

Chapter Four: Schemes Are So Sudden

Think about the tool we call the internet, and everything that's sprung from it.

No one thing has been such a big deal. They're just little steps, small ideas given concrete form.

That includes video-sharing sites and the ability to comment on them.

It includes Twitter. Facebook. All the social networking service.

No one of them is like the invention of the lightbulb, or the telephone, or the printing press—revolutions that divide the world into "before" and "after."

In fact, even the things I just mentioned might not have looked like they had the power to turn the world upside down at the moment they were invented. It took time for them to take hold, spread around the world. But like the story of the tortoise and the hare, you might not notice "slow and steady," until suddenly you realize that things are completely different than they were before.

You look up, and the world has changed.

It seems so sudden. That's why later, after everything is different, old people talk about "the good old days," or complain, "Young people don't know what it's like to XYZ." They don't want to admit that they failed to see all the incremental changes happening.

And thus...

"The US Army in Japan?!"

As the man and another American drove us away from Akihabara, they filled us in on what was going on. Luckily, the guy riding shotgun spoke pretty good Japanese, so we didn't have any trouble communicating. But...

"But why would the US Army be here?"

"It all goes back to that video that leaked on YouTube," said the man who called himself Alan Smith.

He never looked back at us while he talked, so it was hard to say what was on his face. All I could make out where his eyes reflected in the rearview mirror.

“Most people thought it was just a video—pure fiction,” he said. “But for better and for worse, we take the trouble to examine all the information that comes across the network, without making any assumptions about what it is or isn’t.”

“You’re talking about ECHELON?”

“You’re pretty well informed. Yes, that’s one of our tools.”

Mr. Smith was surprisingly forthcoming. Maybe it was his way of saying that all this was off the record.

Incidentally, ECHELON was an American system for eavesdropping on communications networks. The internet, obviously, but also wireless communications, telephone lines, and pretty much any other type of communications system. Foreign nations had had inklings about the setup for a long time, and facilities that were rumored to be terminals for the ECHELON system existed all over the world—including Japan—but America had never publicly admitted to anything. It was, in a word, the most powerful electronic spy network in the world.

It was also a great plot point, so it showed up in novels and stuff a lot.

But anyway...

“So we took a good look at that video. And after repeated comparisons with our data, we noticed that several of the JSDF soldiers in the footage are people in a rather... special position.”

I caught my breath, astonished. I had heard, of course, that software that could compare two pictures and decide if they showed the same person had been developed, with the goal of catching criminals—but I had no idea it was so practical already. Or—could they possibly be supplementing the shortcomings in the software with human labor?

“We do plenty of joint exercises with the Japan Self-Defense Force, both officially and unofficially, and we keep our own videos of those exercises. One of the people who shows up in that footage is your own bodyguard, Sergeant Minori Koganuma.”

“Sergeant...?”

Strictly speaking, the JSDF didn’t have a rank of Sergeant. Granted, it was probably just the Americans using their own terminology to approximate the JSDF’s rank structure.

“Minori-san’s a Private First-Class,” I protested. But come to think of it, those JSDF suits had been talking about her holding the rank of *rikusou*, which would be just about equivalent to a US sergeant...

“According to our data,” Mr. Smith said, “she was an exceptionally capable hand-to-hand fighter, a crack shot—unable to get Ranger qualifications because she was a woman, but a soldier with strong prospects for a quick rise through the ranks.”

“Wait... Did you say she *was*?”

“Everything we have suggests that Minori Koganuma went to an unnamed country as part of a peacekeeping operation, where she went missing and is believed to have been killed.”

“...Huh?”

“A zombie unit,” Mr. Smith said casually.

A zombie unit—a special military unit that doesn’t officially exist, composed of people who are supposedly already dead. (Come to think of it, did Minori-san even have any relatives at all...?) It would be the perfect sort of group to send to another world, into a situation that demanded the utmost secrecy and where you wanted to minimize the chance of information leaks. That was how Matoba-san said they had chosen me to be Amutech’s general manager—I was a shut-in NEET whose disappearance virtually no one would notice.

So... was the same true of Satou-san and all the other soldiers in the Eldant garrison?

“That alone would have been enough to tip us off that the Japanese government was up to something very secret involving the JSDF. And we figured the video was a part of it,” Mr. Smith said. “You might be interested to know that although they haven’t figured out as much as we have, China and Russia have an idea of what’s going on, too.”

“...Huh?”

“Don’t worry. We could have done it without Minori Koganuma, too. Video analysis, the behavior of the JSDF and the Japanese government, requested budgets. Then there’s the fact that the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau doesn’t seem to do very much for all the money it takes up and the amount of communications it generates. We would have figured it out. China in particular has caught more than a few Japanese officials and politicians in honey traps. They might have even more information than we think, even if it’s all verbal.”

“Oh, man...”

Honey traps again.

Basically, they work like this: you get a woman to get close to a man with status or power. She seduces him, and you use that to blackmail him and get information. It's a classic intelligence technique that's been around for hundreds of years. "When you've got a target, start with his money and his women" is so axiomatic that it was even featured in a certain manga.

The fake maid who cornered me earlier had probably been part of a similar plot. That meant China didn't know that here in Japan I was just another citizen—so there were some things their investigation hadn't told them yet.

"Then this happens," Mr. Smith said, showing me something on his phone.

On the screen was our photo—along with the caption "Actresses from THAT movie spotted in Akiba!!"

Twitter.

"This photograph clearly shows Minori Koganuma and all the 'actresses' from the leaked video clip. We've tried to investigate these girls, but they don't match anyone we know anything about. As far as our network is concerned, they don't exist."

I caught my breath again.

"There's something we do know, though. One of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau's hidden bank accounts regularly transfers money to the account of one and only one Japanese citizen—a certain Shinichi Kanou, whereabouts unknown."

I caught my breath a third time. I was suddenly as frightened as if he'd had a knife at my throat.

That's right—I was dealing with a nation-state here. The United States of America, no less, practically speaking the most powerful country on earth. They could find out whatever they wanted!

"I'm sure you can understand we're very interested in this," Mr. Smith said. "Just what are the Japanese government and the JSDF up to, and what does it mean?"

All right. Okay.

Even America hadn't yet grasped that there was an entire world on the other side of the "hole" in Mount Fuji's Sea of Trees. Japan's intelligence system was sometimes derided as being about as leak-proof as a sieve, but even they had managed to hold that last line.

"Are you... Are you saying the reason Minori-san disappeared was...?"

“It looks like there was a Russian operative in the area,” Mr. Smith said flatly. “I appreciate her keeping the ‘polar bear’ busy. It made it a lot easier for us to take the rest of you into custody.”

So you had the Japanese government, doing something that they were trying harder to keep secret than anything they had done before. For some reason it involved a civilian—me—and members of the JSDF. To say nothing of a group of mysterious, beautiful women about whom there was *no* electronic information.

And just when a slew of intelligence agencies are getting especially interested in all this, the lot of us show up gallivanting around Akihabara. Everyone sends their spies in a big hurry, and now here we were.

But what’s he mean, taken into custody?

Were we really?

“Um, so where exactly is this car going?”

“The US Air Force base at Yokosuka,” Mr. Smith said casually. “We have a V-22 Osprey waiting for you there that you’ll all kindly board.”

I didn’t say anything, but I knew this was bad. I wasn’t sure exactly how or why, but it was definitely bad. Going onto another country’s military base was as good as submitting yourself to their legal jurisdiction. Officially, the land the US base was built on was simply rented to the Americans by Japan, and Japanese law technically still applied... but in reality, it wouldn’t have been far off to say that the base was pretty much American territory. It wouldn’t be hard for them to cite situational exigencies or reasons of secrecy or something to keep Japanese military police off the base entirely.

In other words, once they got me onto that base, I was as trapped as if I had been on the American mainland.

So I got away from Chinese and Russian kidnappers—just to let the Americans have me!

The thought hadn’t even occurred to me—when Mr. Smith had mentioned Minori-san’s name, I had been so relieved that I’d just gotten into the car without a fight.

Elvia, sitting beside me, had probably keyed in to the uneasy atmosphere in the car. I took her hand.

“Shin—”

“Hush,” I whispered. “*Iesu are imene.*”

That quieted her down.

“What an interesting language,” Mr. Smith remarked. “I speak five different languages, but I’ve never heard that one. What is it?”

“It’s Zentradian,” I said flippantly.

“That’s a new one to me,” Mr. Smith replied.

“*Das dachan de meltlan chatz?*” I answered, improvising. “It’s close to German. Almost like a dialect...”

For reference, when they did the movie version of *Mac**ss*, the staff really did create a “Zentradian” language for the enemy aliens, based on German to make it sound more realistic. But only an otaku as deep in as I was was likely to know that; I didn’t expect “Alan” to have any idea.

Heck, *I* wouldn’t have known, except my dad told me about it once.

But anyway...

“So you’re suggesting that girl comes from somewhere called Zentradi?”

“Kinda. She doesn’t really speak Japanese, so I was just telling her not to worry.”

“Were you, now?” Mr. Smith nodded.

And then—still holding Elvia’s hand—I said, “So what *you’re* telling *me* is that you’re a bad guy, kidnapping us and the girls in the other car so you can ship us off and use us for your own benefit.”

“That’s awfully harsh,” Mr. Smith said with a shrug. “Wouldn’t you say that it’s the Japanese government, sneaking around behind the backs of the entire world, that’s at fault here?”

I ignored him. “You saw that Minori-san was gone, that your targets were just a helpless otaku and some girls. You figured this was your chance, and pretended to be our friend in order to get to us.” A sharp mind might have thought that it sounded suspiciously like I was offering exposition.

“Shinichi-sama,” Elvia whispered, clasping my hand tight.

“Just for the record,” Mr. Smith said, finally glancing back at us, “both myself and the driver have of course received extensive combat training. An untrained civilian and his Zentradian girlfriend wouldn’t have a chance against us. If you don’t want anyone to get hurt, then I strongly suggest you play nice.”

Then there was a sudden *shick!* and a metal divider popped up out of nowhere between the front and back seats. It was made of a fine mesh that would certainly stop a blade and probably even a bullet. Hey, who owned this car, James Bo*d? I wouldn’t have been surprised to discover this thing

was equipped with a tear-gas sprayer or something that delivered electric shocks. It looked like just a normal sedan, but in reality it was designed to transport prisoners.

"Listen, pressing you for answers right now wouldn't do me any good. How about you take a little nap?"

Mr. Smith pulled on what looked like a simple gas mask with just one hand. I suddenly realized the driver was already wearing something similar.

"All right, Elvia," I said.

Elvia was moving almost before I finished speaking. She rolled up into what looked like a ball, then launched a massive kick that slammed into the mesh divider.

Mr. Smith and the driver were both stunned; this must have been a nightmare scenario for them. They were trapped in a space too confined for them to make the best use of their training, and a seemingly defenseless young woman had just put a huge dent in a barrier probably designed to stop gunfire. The distorted barrier allowed Elvia's kick to reach the back of the driver's head, the unexpected blow pitching him forward and slamming his face into the steering wheel. The car swerved wildly.

"Shit!" Mr. Smith grabbed the wheel, uttering that most stereotypical of all curse words as he reached for some kind of button. He was probably going for a tear gas release or something. No matter how much training he had received, it was just too tight inside the car for him to do much.

But I raised my right hand, the one where I was wearing the ring set with the magical stone, towards the window and shouted, "Tifu murottsu!" I had begun the incantation the instant Elvia attacked, so by the time Mr. Smith was reaching for the button, I was already finished.

The wind magic activated, immediately pressurizing the inside of the car.

"Elvia!"

"On it!"

Elvia, still holding my hand, launched another kick, this time straight at the window.

I'm sure that glass was bulletproof at the very least, but the combination of a point-blank Tifu Murottsu and a kick from Elvia was more than it could take. The glass shattered, tiny shards of it blowing away. In fact, the entire rear left door, the latch overwhelmed by the force of Elvia's kick, went flying open.

“What the hell?!”

“Do you see now, Southern Barbarian? This is the true power of Eastern martial arts—*fa jin*!”

To be fair, the expression “Southern Barbarian” originally referred to the Portuguese and Spanish, and technically doesn’t cover Americans. But never mind.

“Shinichi-sama!” Elvia grasped my hand to her.

Ahh, her chest!! Her chest is—!

There was a second when I felt that soft, soft softness excite my whole body—but meanwhile, Elvia grabbed me up and leaped out of the car.

Normally you would roll on the ground after a move like that to disperse the force of the impact, but Elvia sprang easily off the wall of a nearby building instead, then, with just one more little hop, landed safely on the ground.

“Oh, hey...”

We glanced back to see Mr. Smith’s car careen into the side of a building. I guess the driver *was* unconscious, and the shock of Elvia’s kick to the car’s frame must have sent it into a slide. It didn’t explode or anything, but the hood was pretty cracked up and thoroughly buried in the wall. It didn’t look like that car would be running again anytime soon.

“That’ll do for our escape,” I said, turning to look back the way we’d come. “But Myusel and Petralka are still...!”

The car with the other two girls in it stopped for a moment when the driver saw his colleague’s accident—but when he noticed that we had gotten safely out and Mr. Smith hadn’t, he seemed to put the pieces together. Instead of getting out of his car to check out the situation, he just started driving again.

Crap. I would be in every conceivable kind of trouble if he got away with Myusel and Petralka.

“I’m goin’ after them!” Elvia said and almost started running, but I pulled her back by the hand I was still holding.

“It’s no use! Even you can’t catch a moving car.”

“But—”

“At times like this, you need a taxi or something...” I said, looking around.

And lo and behold, something came sliding into view. “Whoa, what the heck’s going on?!” exclaimed the answer to my prayers. “That is *some*

accident! What happened? I mean, like, why?”

From right below the source of all this jabbering, Madoka and Manami-san of *Rental ☆Madoka* were smiling up at me.

What had just pulled up in front of us was a specially decorated vehicle of the kind people called an *itasha*—a car covered in anime characters. This wasn’t just any car, either. It was a Subaru Impreza—a WRX STI, at that!

The Impreza was a model even I, with a minimum of car knowledge, recognized, one of Japan’s representative performance cars. Along with the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution—affectionately known in Japan as the “LanEvo”—it was one of the top choices of participants in the World Rally Championship, consistently winning in the 2-litre division.

I’d heard there were more and more high-value itasha these days, but...

“What’s going on? Some kind of trouble?” asked the driver, a guy probably in his mid- to late twenties. He was wearing a blackish shirt and blackish pants, his hair was a strange length, and he was wearing fingerless gloves. He gave off the vibe of a serious otaku, and not one gifted with fashion sense.

He did give an impression of being pretty healthy—he had fairly attractive features and he wasn’t overweight. And the chibi figure of Madoka dangling from the rearview mirror put me completely at ease.

“Let us in!” I exclaimed.

“Huh? Whyzat?”

“My friends are in the Chevy that’s speeding away! Let us in and *follow that car*!”

The guy looked shocked for a second—and then he pumped both fists and shouted, “IS THIS ***REALLY*** A CHASE SCENE COME TO LIFE?!”

“Uh, not exac—”

“Hop in!” Impreza Guy said, gesturing at the back seat and looking absolutely thrilled.

I opened the door—Elvia didn’t know how—and shoved the puzzled-looking beast girl inside before jumping in myself.

“Thank you so much!” I said.

“Not a problem, man!” Impreza Guy said. “I may have showed up a little late, but it looks like I’m just in time for the best part!!”

“...Huh?”

An instant later, we were flung back in our seats by the acceleration as the “ita-Impreza” lunged forward.

Woo-hoo! That's a beloved Japanese performance vehicle for you! I can practically see the scenery blurring!

...Er, okay. Not really.

"What did you mean by you may have showed up a little late?" I asked.

"Man, I saw on Twitter that the stars of some movie were in Akiba, so I came out for a look." The guy was as calm as if he was driving to the grocery store, even as he chased the US Army car at an insane speed. "I was like, man, I gotta see this! I had some other stuff to do first, so I couldn't get right over to Akiba. I was kinda down, like, maybe you guys had already left, right? Guess it's my lucky day!"

"Uh... yeah, lucky," I said, nodding along.

At least he didn't seem to have any weird plans for us like the Americans did, but... well, let's just say I was finally coming to *truly* appreciate the power of the internet for both good and evil.

It turned out ita-Impreza Guy's name was Ariga Reito. By day he was your typical industrious office worker, but his true love was his car—his *Rental ☆Madoka*-themed ita-Impreza—which he took to Akihabara to show off. In other words, he was pretty much the quintessential contemporary otaku. He seemed awfully excitable—or maybe just out of control—but I guess all kinds of people can be otaku... and frankly, I was hardly in a position to criticize anyone for being excitable.

But there was excitable, and then there was—

"Man, I'm pumped! '*Follow that car!*' he says! I can't believe I stumbled into a chance to help determine the fate of the world!!"

"Er, I really don't think this is going to have much effect on the fate of the world," I interjected, watching for glimpses of the American car out the windshield. He was swerving left and right, dodging through town, trying to lose us. We would see him for a moment, and then lose track of him again. It was extremely tense.

Myusel and Petralka were in that car. We had to get them back—but without Minori-san, how were we going to do it?

Now that I thought about it, maybe the Americans had brought two separate cars, instead of one vehicle big enough for all of us, with exactly

this situation in mind. Even if one car's occupants somehow managed to escape, they would still have the other captives, who might even make good hostages against the ones who got away.

Speaking of hostages... what was happening to Minori-san? Mr. Smith had said something about her facing off with a Russian operative. The question bugged me something awful, but right now I had to focus on Myusel and Petralka.

Incidentally, I hadn't mentioned to Reito-san that the car we were after belonged to the US Armed Forces. I was afraid that if he knew his target had the full power of a major nation behind it, he might not be so interested in chasing them down. So yeah, you might say I was sort of tricking him, and I didn't feel good about that. But at some point we just had to deal with the situation.

"We don't seem to be getting any closer..." I said.

"Yeah, it's tough in town," Reito-san said. "In a straight line, or on the freeway or something, we'd have him beat hands down. But you start racing through a city and it turns into a contest of driver skill. That guy up there knows what he's doing."

"Hmm..."

"Anyway, even if we caught him, I wouldn't know what to do with him."

"...Oh..."

I hadn't even thought about that. For that matter, if he made it all the way to Yokosuka, then he was as good as gone.

"Just slam into him until he—er, I guess I can't ask you to do that," I said.

"Nah, I don't mind," Reito-san answered.

"Wh-What, really?"

"Man, this has *kidnapping* written all over it. I don't mind bumping someone in an emergency... uh, but you'll foot the bill, right? For the repairs and the vinyls?"

"Uh—" I started, but then I remembered: I had some pretty good money saved up in my bank account. I didn't know exactly how much, but if Amutech had really stuck to the stipulated salary, then by now it was probably enough to buy a whole new WRX STI.

I thought about what my dad had said:

"Leave the salary in your account and just let it grow. You never know when you might need it."

I assumed he hadn't been envisioning quite this particular need, but still...

"I'll pay! I'll get you a new car, anything! Just—please!"

"Awesome, man! I'm gonna hold you to that!" Reito-san was really excited now—had he *wanted* to do this all along?—as he hit the gas.

The ita-Impreza growled and snapped, leaving tire tracks on the road as it lunged after the American car. Before, Reito-san had been checking things out, getting a feel for his opponent. Now he was after him for real.

Until I shouted in alarm.

The back passenger-side window of the car ahead of us opened, and I saw Petralka lean halfway out. It didn't look like she was trying to escape. I could tell because a man had his muscly arm around her neck.

The message was clear: *if you get any closer, we'll kill one of the hostages.*

"Dammit...!" I growled. If we just went up and bashed them, there was a good chance they'd throw Petralka out of the car, and she would end up with more than a few scrapes and bruises. "What do we do...?"

"Guess we can't hit 'em anymore, huh?" Reito-san said. "If this were a movie, someone would have to, like, jump from one car to the other..."

That gave me an idea. "Elvia!" I said, taking her hand again.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry to have to ask a girl to do something so dangerous—but I'm going to have Reito-san get as close to the other car as he can, and then I want you to jump across and rescue Myusel and Petralka!"

"Understood!" she said instantly. Ah, there was a girl you could count on.

"I can't back you up with magic like last time, though," I warned her.

Heck, the last time had only worked because I had a magical stone and was shooting from point-blank range. By and large, it wasn't possible to use ranged magic in a place like Japan, where there was no magical energy. Even using a sprite bottle would be dicey, as the cars would speed past the cloud of magic before I could do anything.

"It'll be okay!" Elvia grinned, giving my hand an encouraging squeeze.

“Can you get alongside them somehow?” I asked Reito-san even as I rolled down the window.

“Only one way to find out!” he said.

A few seconds later, when the car ahead slowed for a corner, Reito-san sent the ita-Impreza screeching through the turn nearly sideways, ending up neck-and-neck with the Chevy.

“Elvia!”

“Rawr!”

Elvia went flying. With all the agility and physical talent of a beast girl, she landed on the roof of the other car.

Someone inside the car shouted, but I couldn’t make out what they said. Elvia, of course, not understanding a word of English, happily reached for the hand of the guy holding Petralka...

“*Rawr!!*”

...and bit down.

There was a whole lot of shouting then.

I’m sure the army guy never expected to be bitten, especially not with the strength of an actual carnivorous beast. He let go of Petralka—and Elvia instantly grabbed the empress to stop her fall.

“Shinichi-sama!” Elvia shouted, and then she dragged Petralka the rest of the way out of the car and flung her at me.

Waitwhat?!

I gave an unhappy little shout and reached out the window—slid all the way out, in fact, until I was sitting on the window frame—and caught Petralka.

“Urgh, ow—that hurts, Shinichi!”

“D—Deal with it!” I pulled Petralka into our car, even if she took a few bumps doing it.

Jeez! I hadn’t expected Elvia to *throw* her.

Petralka, though, was still shouting. “Shinichi, Myusel is still—!”

“I know!”

You think I would forget her, Your Majesty?!

I leaned out of the Impreza again, getting another look at the American vehicle. It was swerving back and forth in an apparent effort to shake Elvia off the roof. It wasn’t going quite as fast anymore, but the rapid, unpredictable movements actually made it harder to get close to.

Elvia worked her way forward and pounded on the windshield, but I guess even she couldn't break through bulletproof glass with anything less than her full strength.

Then things got even worse, because an army guy leaned out the passenger-side window and pointed a gun at Elvia. I guess they had really decided to pull out all the stops. Obviously, with the car whipping all over, they weren't likely to hit her with just a couple of shots, but—

"Whoa! Shit, man, that's a gun! Are these guys yakuza? He looks kinda foreign—the Mafia?"

Reito-san sounded like it was just dawning on him that there was something out of the ordinary going on here, but I didn't have time to reassure him. I recited Tifu Murottsu under my breath, just in case. Like being next to a dragon, though, any magic of mine was likely to get swept away within a few dozen centimeters—so it was really a last-ditch, better-something-than-nothing idea.

Then I heard the gunshots.

One, two, three, *bam, bam, bam*.

Like I thought, the guy wasn't able to get off a clean shot from the window of a wildly swerving vehicle—but to my shock, one of the bullets did appear to graze Elvia.

Astonished, she lost her footing.

That was right when the driver jerked the steering wheel, throwing the car into a slide.

Elvia floated through space.

SUBARU

Crap! She was completely clear of the car now!

No matter how extraordinary her physical abilities might be, if she went flying to the ground and hit her head, it was likely to mean an injury even she couldn't come back from. The panic sent my thoughts into overdrive.

Being nothing but a humble otaku, a simple, normal citizen, I was never going to have that many options. I only had one card I could play, and that was Tifu Murottsu.

So, almost on instinct, I shouted:

""Tifu Murottsu!""

At first, I thought it was my imagination that made me hear double. But then I realized Myusel had shouted the spell from the other car at the same time as. She must have come to the same conclusion, too, figuring it was worth a shot even if it seemed useless.

"Huh?"

What happened next was totally unexpected.

The winds... started swirling together. The magic Myusel and I had released didn't disperse even after it got farther away from us—instead, it formed a whirlwind directly underneath the tumbling Elvia and slowed her fall.

In fact, an instant later she had bounced back to her feet—just in time for our ita-Impreza to come sliding by.

"Shinichi-sama!"

"Are you okay?"

"Sure am! But Myusel's still over there, so I'm gonna take another shot!"

Ahh, such reassuring answers.

...Hey, wait.

I wasn't holding Elvia's hand just then. So how...?

But there was no time for that. Elvia went leaping off again, landing on the roof of the American car with a *thump*.

Out came the guy with the gun, but—

"*Grah!*" This time Elvia had all the time she needed to deal with her opponent. She planted one hand on the roof and did a half-spin, her kick flipping the gun out of the guy's hand.

The army guy shouted something and slid a little farther out, but now it was Elvia's turn to grab *him*, taking him by the arm and pulling him free of the car.

More shouting, and an obviously incredulous expression. He couldn't believe Elvia had dragged him out with just one hand.

The driver could hardly let go of the wheel, and if he tried to shake Elvia off now, his friend would go with her.

Finally, the army guy driving the car decided to stop.

The moment the car came to a halt, Elvia dumped the soldier she was holding and reached inside the vehicle, this time to pull Myusel out.

"You bitch!" the driver cried, getting out of the car.

Well, to be fair, she *was* a female dog...

Okay, not the thing I needed to be thinking about right then.

"Tifu murottsu!" I shouted, hitting the other guy fair and square with a burst of magic.

The car didn't move very far, ten or twenty centimeters maybe, but the two soldiers went flying at least a couple of meters before being thrown to the ground. Two meters may not sound like much, but when your whole body comes down on solid asphalt, you're not just going to get back up again.

Leaving the unconscious soldiers to fend for themselves, we crammed Elvia and Myusel into the ita-Impreza, which had come to a stop in the meantime, and then we made tracks.

Why had we been able to use Tifu Murottsu when Japan supposedly didn't have any magical energy in the atmosphere? To be honest, we didn't have a good answer. There were some fundamental things we didn't even understand about what magic really was. Maybe there was some element of it we were overlooking—but we didn't have time to investigate at the moment.

We decided to go back to my house for the time being. There was a distinct possibility that the US Army or who knew who else had already gotten there first, but I had no idea where else we could turn. Anyway, all the bottles of sprites, the magical energy stone, and all the rest of our personal belongings were there, and I wanted them back.

But there was another matter...

"Awesome! Freakin' *awesome*! What even was that? I am *so pumped* right now!"

Reito-san seemed inordinately happy for having just finished a dangerous car chase. Even seeing me and Myusel use magic hadn't scared him or thrown him off; he'd just said, "What was that? Was that a kame**meha?!" in a way that made it hard to decide whether he was joking or not. I guess he got a big kick out of the duel with the American car.

"Man, that was the coolest thing ever! I'll drive you anywhere you want to go, just name the place! Argh, *so pumped*! Hey, can I do that thing? That thing you did? Will you teach me? I'll call you Sensei!"

This guy was really excited.

That excitement got us a free ride back home, though, so I could live with it. I wanted to ask if he was really safe being so lackadaisical, but I didn't let the words out of my mouth. At that moment I needed all the help I could get keeping us all in one piece and finding out what happened to Minori-san.

We were squeezed into the car together, Petralka in the left rear seat, then me, then Myusel, with Elvia in the front passenger seat. Quarters were so tight that Myusel, Petralka, and I could talk even without specifically holding hands.

"Shinichi," Petralka said, "we do not understand very well what is going on, but we must ask what you plan to do next. Those people from earlier were enemies of yours and Minori's, were they not?"

I didn't know exactly what to say. "Enemies? I'm not really sure... But I guess they weren't friends."

When Petralka said "enemies," she was thinking of opponents in a war, people trying to kill each other. She didn't know anything about the complicated relationship between Japan and America today—and I wasn't sure the absolute monarch of a centralized dictatorship would understand "horizontal government" and the complex interplay of organizational power even if I tried to explain it to her.

I assumed America wasn't trying to start a war with Japan. They did, though, want information from us, and weren't afraid to break a few Japanese laws to get it. I wasn't comfortable suggesting it might be okay to kill these people.

"Look, it would be... well, not impossible to kill them," I said, "but it would cause a lot of trouble. So let's not, okay?" I crossed my arms. "Once we get our stuff from my house, I think the best thing to do might be to get

in touch with Matoba-san and see if he can get us sequestered on a JSDF base or something...”

Considering what we had done to the guys in suits earlier, it would be sort of a ballsy request—but I didn’t really expect the Japanese government to pout and go, “What, *now* you want us? Whatever! Hmph!”

“Yeah... that’s what we’ll do,” I said, pulling out my phone. “We’ll talk to Matoba-san.”

Then I dialed the number he had given me.

“What are you, an idiot?”

Those were the first words out of Shizuki’s mouth when we somehow made it home. She sounded exhausted to the core of her being as she offered her appraisal of our savior Reito-san’s beloved car.

Then again, calling a car an idiot was kind of strange itself, so maybe she was actually insulting Reito-san and all of us who had shown up in the ita-Impreza.

I guess she didn’t like otaku any more than ever.

“What is with this *car*?” she said. “It’s *covered* in anime girls. It’s sickening.”

“Er, uh, I’m really sorry,” I said to Reito-san, bowing my head apologetically. “My sister... well, it’s a long story, but let’s just say she doesn’t like otaku very much.”

“Oooh,” Reito-san said, clenching a fist. “No, man! That cold, critical gaze... I couldn’t ask for more!”

“.....guh?” Shizuki said.

Ah... So he was *that* kind. I hadn’t met many of them in real life... not that I had any right to judge anyone’s preferences.

“I get it, man. There are all these posers out there now who are, like, ‘fashionably otaku.’ Like, they watch a little late-night anime and suddenly they think they’re entitled to go around calling themselves poor, suffering otaku—as if! Being an ‘otaku’ these days is turning into just an excuse for reals to have a bunch of character goods lying around!”

Gee, Reito-san was really passionate about this.

“Otaku, man, we’re supposed to be *oppressed*! Martyrs crucified on the very works we love as people look at us and go, ‘Ugh, what’s *that*?’!

There's a path your eyes only open to when you've experienced that kind of sacrifice! So bring on the looks of disgust, the eyes of judgment! Mock me, spit on me, *hate me*!"

Shizuki, who had retreated to the entryway, was watching all this in alarm. But as for me...

"Reito-san!"

"Do you understand what I'm saying?!"

"Yes!"

There was an audible *clap* as we clasped hands.

I was deeply, deeply moved. He was right: an otaku's love is the love of a martyr! Their devotion to a work or character withstands criticism from the whole world, it survives all contempt and scorn to open a path heretofore unknown!

"—But I won't forgive you," Reito-san said, still holding my hands.

What?! I thought.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat?!" I said.

"Think about it: you've been running around Akiba with three beautiful women! And where do you get off having such a gorgeous little sister?! It's like you've got a charmed life! A harem or something! All you need now is to get summoned to another world, run into a beautiful bespectacled maiden and an older-sister-type character, and you'll have it all!"

I'm very sorry; I've, er... already checked those boxes.

Not that I could tell him that.

Wait, that wasn't the point...

"Gah! You damn real, I won't tell you to explode—but only because I'm gonna tear you apart!!"

Then Reito-san grabbed me in a full nelson.

Yikes! I know he saved us and everything, but I'm starting to wonder what's wrong with this guy!

The thought had hardly gotten through my head when—

"I'm glad you seem to be having fun together."

We all turned in surprise. I knew that voice.

"Matoba-san..."

There he was, looking exactly the way he did in the other world—same ugly suit, not a hair out of place. The chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau.

At Matoba-san's suggestion, we moved from standing outside the front door of my house to gathered in the government-owned (he claimed) microbus he had come in. I had suggested my living room instead, but Matoba-san insisted that what we were going to say wasn't something my family or any other unauthorized people could be allowed to hear. So the minibus it was.

"Other unauthorized people," by the way, included Reito-san. He left his ita-Impreza where it was in front of my house, saying he would wait until we were done talking for the completely stupid (in the best sense) reason that it, quote, "looked like something interesting was going on."

So anyway, there we were...

"Things are roughly as you heard from the American officer," Matoba-san said.

Despite the name "microbus," the interior was really pretty spacious, especially with just the few of us in there. I wondered why Matoba-san had brought this particular vehicle. Had he planned all along to use it as a space for private conversations?

"Our little film... It's uncommon for the Japan Self-Defense Force to participate in moviemaking, and that got the attention of foreign intelligence agencies. It didn't take them long to notice that they had no data on any of the non-JSDF persons who appeared in the clip."

Well, of course they didn't. Those people were all from another world. Something on Petralka, at least, probably existed in Matoba-san's reports, or in the most secret of the government's secret information files, but I would be surprised if they had any materials at all about Myusel or Elvia, people who weren't VIPs.

"I don't believe any country has yet realized that an entirely separate world is involved. But they are certainly aware that something is amiss. And one of them launched a cyber-attack on a government server, in which some information about you, Shinichi-kun, leaked out."

"...That'd be my bank account, huh?"

"And a few other things besides, but yes. The compromised information also included the lease for the building in Akihabara we used

when we ‘hired’ you. So the various agencies were already keeping an eye on that area.”

“I see...”

Twitter or no Twitter, that was why the foreign operatives had shown up so fast.

“In any event, the thing everyone wants most is information on whatever it is the Japanese government is up to. They would love to get their hands on someone personally involved and pump them for specifics. Capturing Koganuma-kun—whether it was Russia or China or whoever else that did it—probably served the dual purpose of stripping you of your protection and gaining them a potential lead.”

I groaned. I of all people understood how callous a national government could be toward the well-being of a single individual, but I had been so worried about the Japanese government that I had never even thought about what other nations might do. That had put Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia at risk, and maybe gotten Minori-san captured.

What am I gonna do?

As much as I hated to admit it, that one sentence summed up all my feelings.

Matoba-san, whether or not he was aware of what I was thinking, said, “You’re in serious danger here. You need to go back to Eldant.”

“Huh? But—”

“Not to mention, the simple fact that the Empress of Eldant is here in Japan could itself cause a crisis.”

“Yes... Indeed,” Petralka said with an almost sarcastic expression. (As soon as we had gotten in the bus, I’d opened one of our sprite bottles so we could all talk using our magic rings.) “We had not imagined that our nation was a secret in Ja-pan.”

Matoba-san just shrugged. No question: from Petralka’s perspective, this didn’t look good. The way Japan was hiding the existence of the Eldant Empire from everyone else on Earth, it would be all too easy to think they were embarrassed about the place.

But there was more. “In a word, you do not wish to give the Holy Eldant Empire opportunities to trade with countries beside your own, but wish to trade with us exclusively, for your own profit.”

“Ahem. I believe control of information is a fundamental diplomatic tactic,” Matoba-san said, pointedly conceding nothing. “Our secrecy about

the Holy Eldant Empire derives from the great esteem in which we hold you, as an equal nation and trading partner. This has nothing to do with any kind of embarrassment or scorn."

His words lacked a certain persuasiveness, coming as they did from a functionary of the very government that had previously attempted a cultural invasion of the Eldant Empire. I was sure Matoba-san was aware of that, but, well, that was the sort of paradox a bureaucrat had to navigate.

"...We should be pleased if that were true," Petralka said, fixing Matoba-san with a suspicious stare.

And so we decided: the next morning, we would take a car arranged by Matoba-san, guarded by a bodyguard arranged by Matoba-san, to the hyperspace wormhole near Mt. Fuji. In light of the possibility that any number of operatives from any number of countries might try to pull something, he apparently thought it was better to go out in broad daylight than to make a clumsy midnight run.

In the meantime, thankfully, public security personnel were stationed around my house—even the microbus, apparently, was something hurriedly requisitioned from Public Security—and Matoba-san's estimation was that we would "probably be okay until morning."

Only one thing was really clear: there was nothing more I could do for the moment.

Reito-san, by now terminally interested in whatever was going on, decided to stick around at my house, but...

"Sigh..." I sighed.

I was in my room, with Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia nowhere to be found. They must have been in the living room—I had asked them to leave me by myself for a while.

...This sucks.

Honestly, this was way worse than the time back in Eldant when I had been targeted by a JSDF special-forces unit. Now it wasn't me, but Minori-san, who had worked so hard to keep me safe, who might be in danger—and there was nothing I could do about it.

I felt a whole swarm of emotions—frustration, fear, loneliness, the wish that I could apologize. I had no idea what to do with all these feelings.

“To go ‘home’ to Eldant...”

Regardless of my personal feelings, even I understood that that was probably best. If I were the hero of some novel or manga or something, it’d be one thing, but I was just a lone otaku, and I wasn’t going to win a fight with who knew how many national information agencies. My enemy had a name now, sort of, but I didn’t know how many of them there were and had no idea what the full picture was. Even if we knew, say, their operating budgets and numbers of people, what hope did a former shut-in have of really understanding how to deal with any of that?

All of it just made me feel more and more helpless. I put my head in my hands and groaned.

That was when I heard a knock at the door.

“Shinichi-sama?” Myusel said. “May I... come in?”

“Uh... Yeah, sure,” I said.

When the door opened, there was Myusel with a plate in her hand. On the plate was a small teacup, a teapot, and several rice crackers.

“Par-*don* me,” Myusel said as she entered the room.

“You went to the trouble of making tea for me?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I know you didn’t ask.” Maybe Myusel had used a sprite bottle on the way in, because suddenly our magic rings were functioning. I took the plate and set it on my desk.

That desk was pretty much the only other thing in my room besides my bed; there weren’t a lot of other places to put things or sit down. I lowered myself onto my bed—but Myusel stayed standing. “Your honored younger sister told me,” she said.

“Oh, uh... really?” I’d thought Shizuki was busy giving the cold shoulder to everyone I’d brought with me, but maybe she was starting to warm up a bit. Or maybe Myusel was just that nice.

“Er, Shinichi-sama. I apologize for being very forward...”

“Huh? Oh, you mean the tea? No, don’t worry about it. I mean really, thank you.”

Myusel must have figured that bringing me tea when I had asked to be left alone was going against my express wishes. Maybe some people would think so, but at that moment, I felt immensely grateful for it. I guess you could say it reminded me of my daily life back in Eldant. Me in my room. Myusel bringing me tea.

Of course, my room looked very different, and the tea was simple *sencha*, and there were only humble rice crackers to go with it—but even so, it made me feel that much closer to a life I could relax in.

It was remarkable: I was supposed to be the cultural invader, but instead I found myself completely enthralled by Eldant. It had worked the "wrong" way around. It was almost funny—almost.

"Um, Shinichi-sama." Myusel looked like she had made up her mind about something. "If... If there's anything I can do to help, I'll do it."

"Th—Thanks."

I wasn't sure what else to say. To me, it sounded like she was just being encouraging. It was nice of her, but it didn't mean all that much to me.

But apparently that wasn't how Myusel felt...

"Even if what you ask for is... is strange, or seems impossible, I won't argue," she said.

"Huh?"

"I'll help you with whatever you ask for, Shinichi-sama!"

"Myusel..."

Come to think of it... What was it Minori-san had said about Myusel threatening Elvia with a gun when I had been kidnapped by Bahairam?

That's not the sort of thing you do just because you think you'll get something out of it. In fact, if any of them had been deciding what to do based on what was "best," I would probably have a spike in my head right now and be a doll chirping "yes" and "no" like some cheap toy.

"It's really..." I gave a wan smile. "It's always you, isn't it, Myusel?"

"What...?" She blinked. "Wh-What's always me? Am I always the one who screws up—?"

"No, that's not what I meant," I said.

Whenever I was lost or wondering what to do, the one who gave me that push was always Myusel. Maybe she didn't realize it, but time after time she'd given me the courage to do what I had to do. There were times when someone watching us might have said that it led me to do crazy, stupid things, things that made no sense by some utilitarian logic. But sometimes crazy, stupid things were the only choice I had.

I was just one otaku, after all. A single citizen. I couldn't hope to fight any government. Even I thought so—and I was usually the one who didn't think hard enough about whatever I planned to do. It made me feel pathetic.

"Myusel, you've helped me... get it together a little more. Thank you."

"Oh, it's nothing, I-I—"

"Heek?!"

From just behind Myusel, there was a crash and the door flew open. Petralka, Elvia, and, believe it or not, Shizuki came tumbling into the room. Presumably they had all been leaning against the door eavesdropping.

"Wha— Wha—?"

"F-For your information, we were not listening to you!" Petralka said from somewhere underneath Elvia, waving her arms.

"For sure, Shinichi-sama! It's not like we told Myusel she oughta put some tea on and go check on you!"

"What is going on here?! I mean what?! I don't understand anything anymore!" Shizuki complained as she and Elvia got up.

I looked at them all—and then I realized.

It wasn't just Myusel. It was all of them.

It was my tremendous good fortune to have so many people who worried about me when I felt lost and alone.

"Hrmph! What are you smiling about, Shinichi?" Petralka demanded.

“Yeah, what’s so funny?” Shizuki said. “My stupid otaku of an older brother...”

One of them sounded like a parody of a little-sister character, and one of them actually was my little sister, and that only made me smile more.

“Shizuki...” I said.

“What?” she demanded.

“You really are tsundere, aren’t you?”

“G-Go to hell, you stupid otaku!”

I didn’t realize then.

I didn’t know that a group of almost a dozen armed men had neutralized my security detail and were silently surrounding my house even as we spoke.

□□□□□

To Be Continued...

Afterword

Hiyo, light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 9 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

Hey, just so you know, in addition to the normal release, this volume is available in a limited edition with an included drama CD. I wrote the script and the cast of the anime performed it. It features everybody going nuts—uh, in the best possible way. The actors really killed it, and I laugh every time I listen to it, if I may say so myself.

It's been a long time since I did a script like that, so I kind of accidentally reverted to my novel writing habits, much to the chagrin of Hanae-san, who plays Shinichi. (He had a lot of very long lines.)

The story itself doesn't really have anything to do with the main plot, and there's some kind of meta stuff in there. Just think of it as me getting a little carried away, what with the anime happening and, uh... forgive me.

And so but anyway.

The seed for the plot of this novel actually first appeared in the anime: Shinichi goes back to Japan.

In the show, only Myusel accompanies him to Japan (and subsequently to Akihabara), but since I was behind the curve on this one anyway, I decided to liven it up a bit by including Petralka and Elvia getting in their licks in in the ol' home country.

Then there's Shizuki, a character whose name has been spoken only in whispers (figuratively! very foreshadow-y!) and who could never have played a real role in the story unless Shinichi was in Japan. I also set up some other things that should pay off later, to the extent that I ended up needing a second volume to finish out the story arc. Sorry about that. Think of it this way: more volume means more story, which means I had plenty of room to have some fun. Hope you look forward to the conclusion.

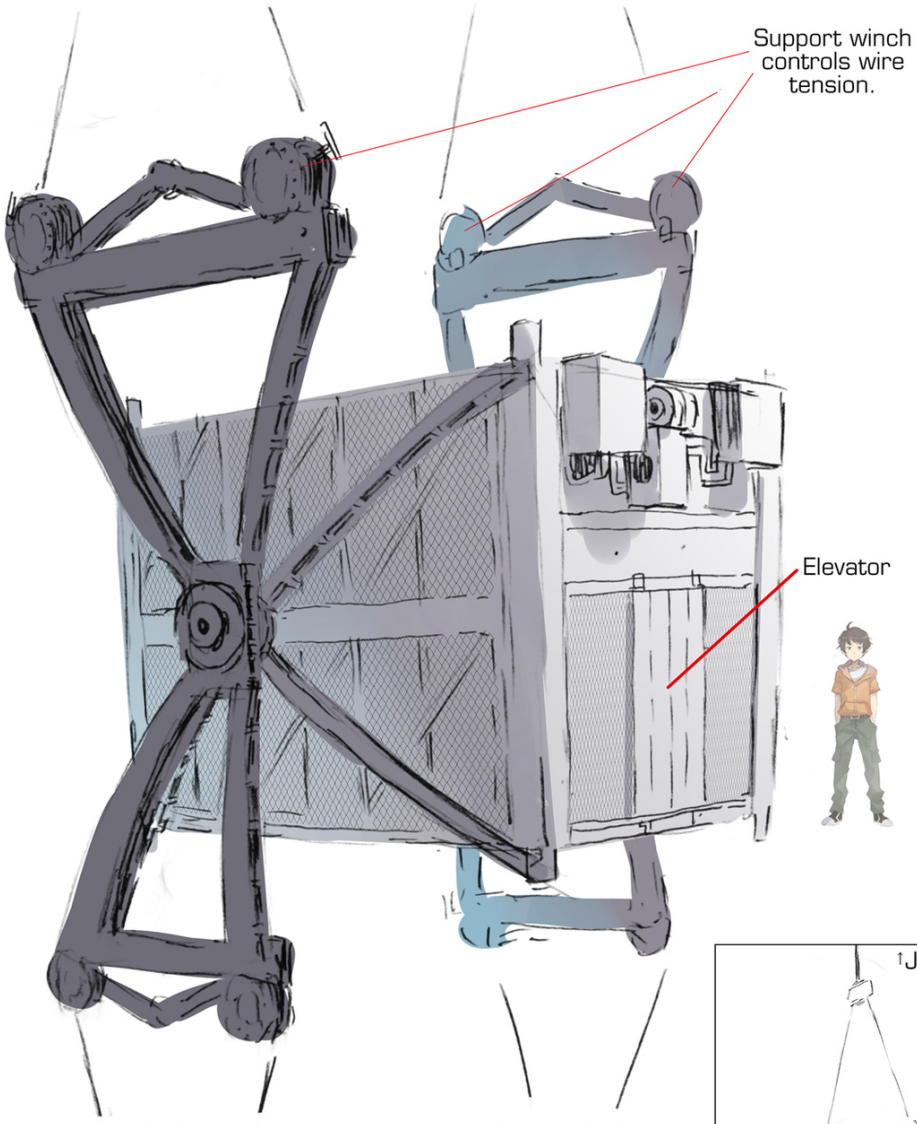
Now, then. Outbreak Company is at nine volumes already. We're gonna be breaking into two digits with the next release! Exactly how long and how far this story will go—how many total volumes it'll be—is something I

don’t know right now, but I’m so grateful for all the support this series has gotten from readers so far.

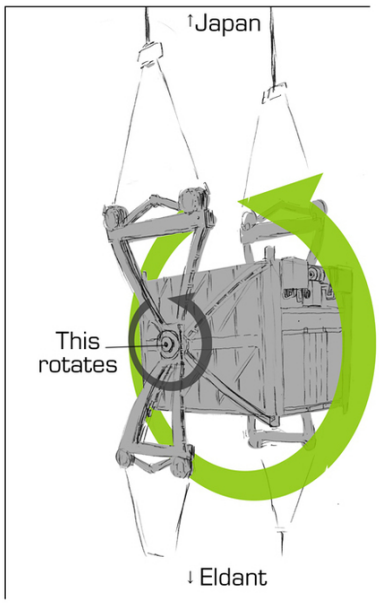
I would be thrilled if you’d continue to join me for Shinichi and company’s zany adventures.

Ichiro Sakaki
29 Apr 2014

Hyperspace Tunnel



Large winch/cranes in each world used to lift the box.



Design Notes

I didn't conceptualize this as something built specifically for travel through empty space, but rather as improvised from available parts (cranes and elevator, shipping-crate winches, etc.), as one might do in wartime. For that reason, it's a very utilitarian contraption that prizes functionality over aesthetics.

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Outbreak Company: Volume 9
by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE